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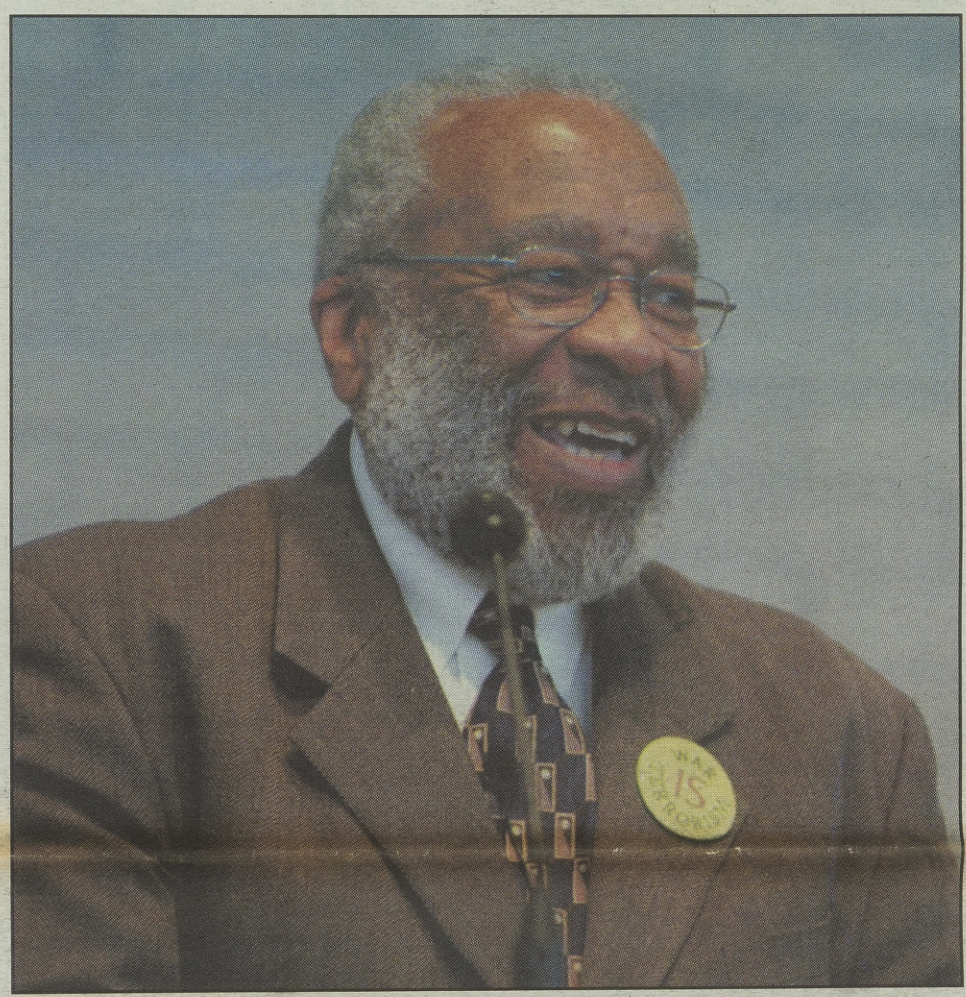
JUSTICE NEWS & HOMELESS BLUES IN THE BAY AREA

Vincent Harding and the Southern Freedom Movement



Vincent Harding was a close friend of Martin Luther King, Jr. He drafted King's Riverside Church speech "Beyond Vietnam." His button says: "War *is* Terrorism."

by Terry Messman

Vincent Gordon Harding began working closely with Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Freedom Movement in the early 1960s as a nonviolent trainer and activist who was arrested in the struggles to overcome segregation and racial discrimination.

An eloquent speaker and writer, Harding also was a peacemaker, and his early — and prophetic — condemnation of the Vietnam War was a crucial influence in inspiring King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to take a bold and uncompromising stand against the war at a moment in our nation's history when it mattered most — and was most controversial.

Harding arrived at our interview on April 23 wearing a button conveying a stark insight: "War *is* Terrorism." The small button speaks volumes about the long-standing faithfulness of a man who still carries on his commitment to peacemaking and nonviolent resistance to America's present-day war machine, even though it is now 60 years since he became a conscientious objector as a young man in his early 20s, while serving in the U.S. Army from 1953-1955.

He is still upholding his witness for peace some 46 years after he was asked by Martin Luther King, Jr. to write the first draft of one of the most momentous speeches in U.S. history, King's ""Beyond Vietnam" speech, delivered on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York. The speech was a prophetic call to end U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War — an outspoken cry for peace that was literally heard 'round the world.

Dr. King had already been speaking out against the war, and turned to Harding to draft this eloquent anti-war speech because the two men shared deeply held moral and philosophical convictions about the injustice and cruelty of the Vietnam War. King essentially delivered Harding's words that day with only a few modifications. It turned out to be one of the most controversial anti-war speeches in modern U.S. history, and ignited both a firestorm of criticism and an outpouring of support.

At the time of King's Riverside speech in 1967, Harding already had thought about the issues of war and peace for many years. After becoming a conscientious objector in the 1950s, he became involved in the Mennonite Church, one of America's historic "peace churches."

Harding and his late wife, Rosemarie Freeney Harding, moved to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1960 to participate in the Southern Freedom Movement as representatives of the Mennonite Church. Vincent

See **Vincent Harding** *page 4*

The Patron Saint of Charity and Justice

Martin de Porres was a defender of homeless people, a healer of the sick, a protector of unwanted animals, and the patron saint of all victims of racial prejudice.

by Joan Clair

Martin de Porres was born in Lima, Peru in 1579. His mother was a freed African slave and his father was a Spanish aristocrat. After seeing that his newborn son's skin color was black, Martin's father refused to acknowledge his paternity. Martin was brought up in poverty, along with his sister Joan who was also not acknowledged in spite of her lighter skin color.

In that era, many groups suffered discrimination and mistreatment, including Indians, Africans, poor women who had no dowries, orphaned and homeless children, and animals. Those discriminated against were regarded as not rational in comparison with the Spanish aristocrats who considered themselves possessed of reason and therefore superior.

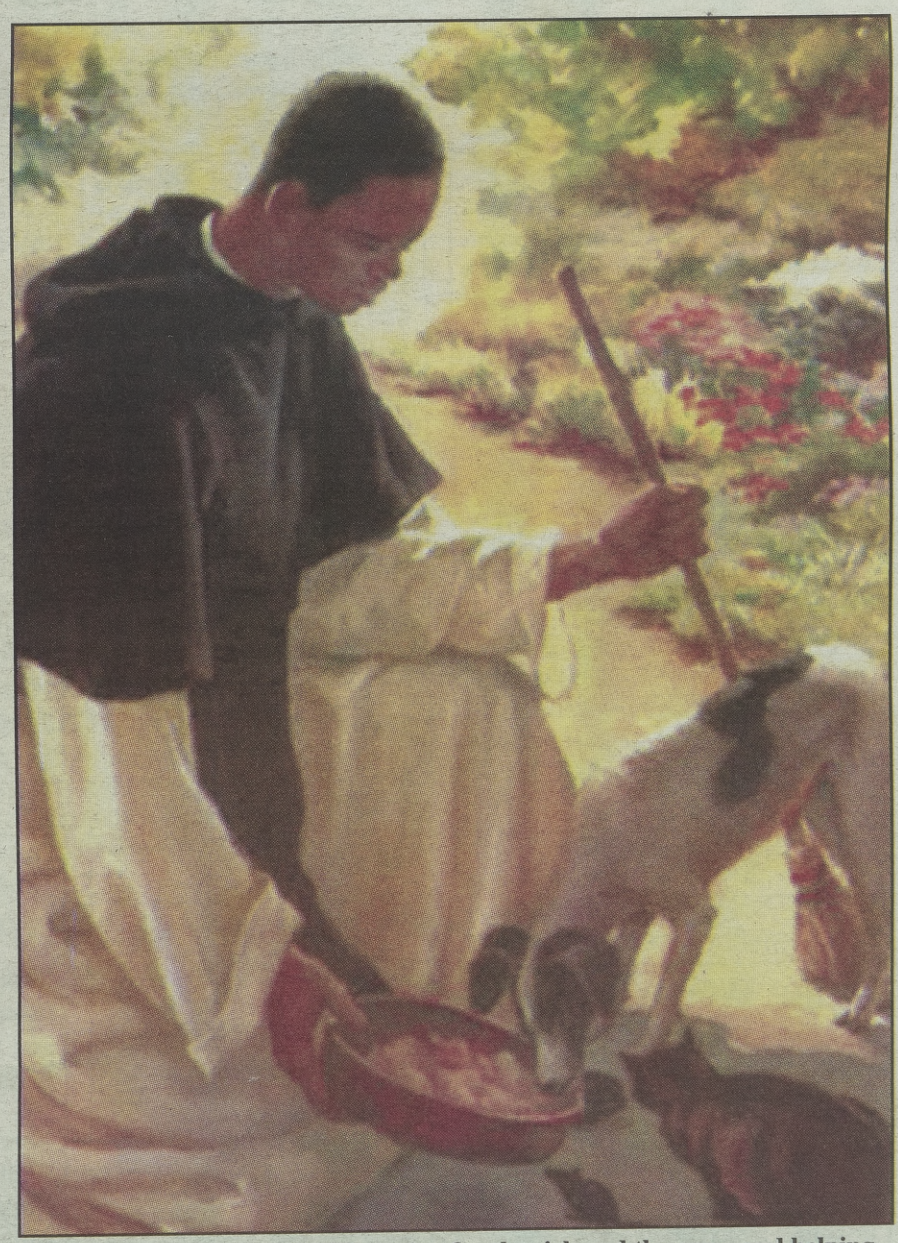
Martin broke through all these stereotypes and began offering charity wherever it was needed. At a very early age, when his mother gave him what little money was available to buy food for the family, Martin often would come home empty-handed, for he could not pass by an injured, homeless or hungry human or animal without trying to help. As a child, he was punished severely for his generosity. Nevertheless, his compassion towards those in need remained one of the hallmarks of his entire life.

After Martin's father finally acknowledged his paternity, he began an apprenticeship with a barber-surgeon. A barber in those days was a doctor and herbalist; he did not simply cut hair, so he learned about medicine and caring for the sick, and his concern and compassion for those suffering ill health would become a lifelong commitment.

At the age of 15, Martin felt drawn to the Dominican Order in Lima and was accepted as a tertiary, the lowest ranked member of the order — one who was expected to do all the menial tasks. He performed these tasks for his entire life, refusing to enter the priesthood of the order even though his father's influence would have enabled him to do so. He was not interested in rank, although eventually he became a lay brother in the Dominican Order.

The holy card of Martin de Porres portrays him with a broom, an acknowledgement of his humility and his dedication to

See **Patron Saint of Charity** *page 12*



Martin de Porres spent his life caring for the sick and the poor, and helping homeless animals. His broom symbolizes a lifelong dedication to humble work.

A Poet's Sendoff for *'Saint Carlos the Melodious'*

In a city full of poets, there are few whose very lives are poetry. Carlos was one whose whole life was poetry.

by Kitty Costello

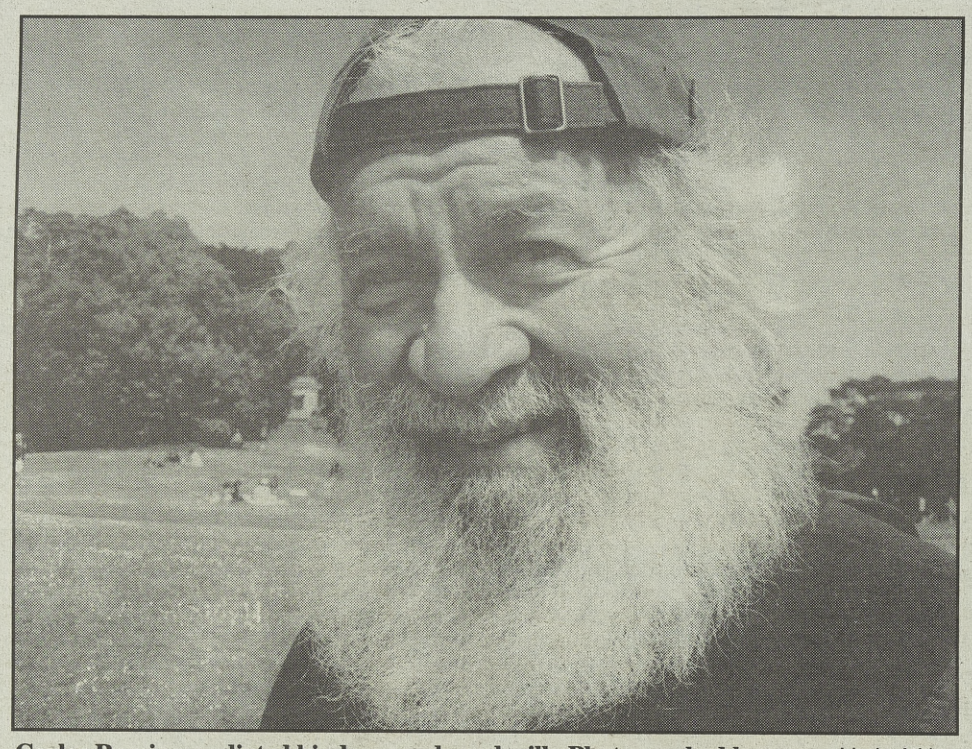
Ninety friends, family members, and poets gathered on Sunday, April 21, at St. Martin de Porres House of Hospitality on Potrero Street in San Francisco to celebrate the life of the playful, beloved songster and poet Carlos Ramirez (1938-2013), who died on March 10 after a relatively brief bout with brain cancer.

Carlos was a well-known figure in his Mission District neighborhood and beyond, easily recognizable by his halo of white hair, his long white beard, and his sweet-hearted, whimsical manner. He was involved in so many different communities in the city for so many years, that one memorial participant commented, "You don't ask, 'How did you know Carlos?' Rather, how could you *not* know Carlos?"

He was a regular at many of the poetry readings in town, including Sacred Grounds Coffee House, Om Shan Tea's Open Heart Poetry, and La Boheme Café at 24th & Mission, where another memorial gathering was held for him last month.

Carlos studied poetry at New College and City College, and he attended writing groups at Central Hospitality House, Faithful Fools, and Studio Arts in the Tenderloin, to name a few. He attended several Zen and Insight meditation groups in the city, was part of the Freedom Song Network, exchanging peace and pro-labor music with other activists, and he performed in numerous fundraisers for AIDS and cancer relief, for the children of El Salvador, and other causes.

Carlos was San Francisco-born to Salvadoran parents, then moved to El Salvador at age 3, returning to the United States four years later when his family fled during a revolution. He lived in the Bay Area after that, settling eventually into the Mission District.



Carlos Ramirez radiated kindness and good will. Photographed here in Golden Gate Park, his halo of white hair shines in the sun. Linda Atkins photo

His creative work combined original and borrowed poetry, song and dance, and was marked by sprightly inventiveness and playfulness, both in formal performance as well as on street corners, on MUNI bus rides, or in casual encounters with friends. Carlos had a special fondness for the poetry of Langston Hughes, setting some of his poems to music.

He worked as a substitute teacher in the San Francisco school district, where he had a reputation for rarely sticking to the lesson plan, sometimes serenading the students with voice and guitar. He taught poetry and song to children through the public library and other venues, including traveling to El Salvador to work with children there.

In 2012, Carlos published a selection of his work, called *My Heart in the Matter: Stories, Songs & Poems*.

From the many rich songs, prayers, eulogies, stories and poems heard at Carlos's memorial, here are a few insights and revelations:

From his rooftop in the Mission District, he could be heard daily at 7 a.m., crowing like a rooster.

His outgoing message on his phone was a musical invitation that included waltzing bears.

He was a tender-hearted guy who wasn't afraid to let it happen.

No one can remember ever hearing Carlos say an unkind word about another person. He believed that if we knew a person's whole story, we couldn't judge ... yes, even Hitler.

He listened at all costs to his interior self rather than to social convention.

When he was with you, he would give you his whole and complete presence.

He radiated kindness and good will, and those present at the memorial were encouraged to give a warm, loving smile to every single person we meet in honor of Carlos.

Another reader announced his canonization as "Saint Carlos Ramirez, the Melodious."

Through Native American ritual and song, we were encouraged to let go of Carlos with joy, to let his spirit be free, the same way he lived his life. It was noted that in a city full of poets, there are few whose very lives are poetry. Carlos was one whose whole life was poetry.

Too Soon, Carlos, Too Soon

(for Carlos Ramirez)

by Kitty Costello

You could see his halo
from blocks away
down sun-seared Mission streets,
his glow arriving well before
his sweet smile-crinkled face
came to full view

Beside the produce stand one day,
our friendship still new,
he showed me how
you could wrap yourself, each arm
clasping the opposite shoulder,
to gently knead and rock
rock and knead in self-embrace
whenever feeling loveless or afraid

Eyes and ears deeply tuned, he'd ask,
"How's Kitty today?" meaning me
and my answer,
rapt in soul listening,
let me hear
unforeseen selves speaking

When powers-that-are
BELLOWED,
leaned their
mean weight down —
soldiers, fathers, petty cops –
he shied deeply in
to ready refuge
of his own vast tenderness

Crooning his poem tunes,
teaching us how to make rain,
pied pipering children
who let flow for him their
no-longer-silent poet voices
onto once white paper.

Crucible

by Carlos Ramirez

Organ cactus
on Alvarado Street
rises
deepens

Each
column
is ringed
by dots
who once
flowered
in their place

This cactus
knows abuse

Its stalks
were axed
years ago
by neighbors
furious
with the property's
landlord

Since then,
offspring
have bloomed
from its
crippled stumps

I wonder:
what mysteries
inhabit
its looming
breath
and aren't we
each
a cactus,
regenerative
succulent
vulnerable

to anyone,
who
strikes us
in fits
of rage
and terror?

CARLOS RAMIREZ*

by Jack Hirschman

Comrade and revolutionary
lover of such rich and
meaningful independence,
relishing every zenny compa,
always reverberating,
living on smiles,
rendering all means indivisible,
reading every zero coolly
as real lost ones.

See reincarnate
a man in radiant eternal zest.
Congregate and ring
love's old sweet
radical and manifest
intensity
Ramirezing every
zone.

(* an acrostic in which each word begins with a letter from the name CARLOS RAMIREZ repeated 4 times)

Some Words

by Carlos Ramirez

What are we here for
if not
to bow
sway, sing
as ripening apples
beneath
the sun's reign?

Childhood Woes

by Carlos Ramirez

The kid
who needs
an audience

Sullen cries

where does this
come from?

A pit
of sorrow

Not given
a chance
to play
with language,
to shape
the clay
of words

Patriarch dad says
speak Spanish here
if you
want to eat

Where can I
speak my heart,
find friends?

I touch
these wounds
today.

War Cries

by Carlos Ramirez

I'm about
eight years old

This one
Sunday
afternoon,
pop orders me
to go to
the movies

I don't want to,
he flails me
with his belt,
I wail.
He yells,
I'm doing this
for your own good

I stiffen,
surrender

Walk with
brother Jorge
and sister Ivy
to the Alexandria

Blue Skies
smiling at me
Nothing but
Blue Skies
do I see

Stars Bob Hope
And Bing Crosby

Why am I being forced
to see a movie?

I learn some things
about him
one day

He was orphaned
at age fifteen,
walked from El Salvador
to Guatemala.
Shoes unraveled
en route,
peed on his feet
to keep the skin
from cracking

Sported a bullet scar
on his right hip

Would entreat kisses
from mom
in the kitchen
to no avail

Talked about himself
just one time
in all the years
I knew him
as a youth.

First Victory for Homeless Person's Bill of Rights

Rhode Island has already passed a Homeless Bill of Rights. Oregon, Vermont, Connecticut and Missouri are joining California in calling for one.

The federal government has abandoned any pretense of ensuring decent and affordable housing to citizens. Robert L. Terrell photo

When millions of people are sleeping in our streets and shelters every year, and when more than 1 million children who go to our public schools every day don't have a home to go to that night, it is a national crisis that demands a federal response.

by Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP)

Members and allies of the Western Regional Advocacy Project celebrated a big first victory on April 23 when the California "Homeless Person's Bill of Rights and Fairness Act" (Assembly Bill 5), authored by Tom Ammiano, passed through the Assembly Judiciary Committee by a 7-2 vote. AB 5 protects people's right to use public spaces. It calls for the creation of Hygiene Centers, protection of homeless youth, and access to counsel during civil prosecution for being homeless.

A Homeless Bill of Rights is particularly significant today. Our federal government has abandoned any pretense of its responsibility to "ensure safe, decent and affordable" housing for the poorest people in our country as it committed to do in 1937 when what is now HUD was formed [see the Housing Act of 1937].

After years of funding cuts, neglect and the demolition of public housing, the 1998 Congress went so far as to say "the federal government cannot be held accountable to ensure housing for even a majority of its citizens" [see the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act, 1998]. While Congress may have ignored its legislative mandate from 1937, it has with great conviction adhered to the 1998 (lack of) responsibility.

Year after year, we learn of yet another series of funding cuts, of Section 8 units being converted to market rate, of additional public housing units being demolished with no intention of ever replacing them, and of even more tightening of eligibility criteria so as to exclude people from even being able to apply for housing assistance.

Add this to the loss of factory jobs through corporate tax credits for relocation overseas, the ever-shrinking time limits on welfare assistance, foreclosures, the rising cost of healthcare and the increasing disparity between rich and poor, and it is no wonder that homelessness has stayed with us for the past 30 years. In fact, it would be a miracle if it hadn't.

Since 1983, local governments have been expected to manage this evolving crisis with only miniscule amounts of federal funding for emergency shelters, social workers, and a very small number of transitional housing units. And for the past 15 years, those local communities have been rebelling. Rather than fight the Feds, however, they are putting their energies into attacking poor and homeless people.

The Feds deprive the state and local governments, the state deprives the county and city governments, and in a sure sign of exasperation after years of abuse and neglect, all of them turn around and attack the poor and homeless people who are trying to live out their lives in spite of having no roof over their head.

We have been here before as a country, during the Depression. It is a darker side of ourselves we prefer to keep hidden in the crevices where our fears reside. We wish it weren't true or are ashamed of what we are doing, so we pretend it's not really happening. "Anti-Okie laws would never happen today" or "Sun Down Towns are a relic of our past" we tell ourselves, and maybe even think it might be true. But, deep down, we know it's not.

With sleeping, sitting, and standing having again become criminal offenses, California has officially revived an ugly part of its history. We are again using our "criminal justice" systems, coupled with the power of our governmental institutions and media networks, in order to demonize, dehumanize, and ultimately criminalize the people who represent to us a reality we don't want to see or face.

The answer is *not* to call the cops, and *not* to strictly enforce sitting-on-the-sidewalk laws, loitering laws, being-in-the-parks laws, sleeping-in-a-vehicle laws, anti-food-distribution laws, and, of course, the tried and true panhandling laws. The answer is *not* to try to convince ourselves that if *they* can't sit, sleep, stand still, or ask for alms — then maybe, *they* will leave. Or if they don't leave, we always have that brand new jail we were able to get federal funding to help us build.

This is why we need a Homeless Bill of Rights.

If the federal government doesn't care about "these" people, if it refuses to restore funding for affordable housing, if it continues to evade its responsibilities, it does not mean local governments and communities need to do the same.

Our local governments and our local communities need to work with each other, not fight with each other over whether life-sustaining acts such as sleeping, resting, or eating, are or are not crimes. We need to generate the focus and attention on what matters.

We need to speak to our federal government with one voice. We need to say that when millions of people are sleeping in our streets and shelters every year, and when more than 1 million children who go to public schools every day don't have a home to go to that night, it is a national crisis that demands a federal response.

When we are so clearly able to document the cause and effect of federal housing assistance cuts in the early 1980s with the advent of mass contemporary homelessness across the country, it is a national crisis that demands a federal response.

California's Homeless Person's Bill of Rights and Fairness Act (AB 5) demands that the State of California differentiate between criminal acts that a person might commit (regardless of housing status) and life-sustaining acts we all perform but become criminal offenses when those without housing commit them.

Rhode Island has already passed a Homeless Bill of Rights and Oregon, Vermont, Connecticut and Missouri are joining California in calling for one. These bills reflect a growing dissatisfaction with the current tools and strategies available to localities to address the growing economic disparities that inevitably result in human rights abuses.

AB 5 is a bill that says to local governments that, regardless of whether or not you are frustrated and angry that the federal government has abandoned your needs, it is not ok for you to take that anger out on people who are less powerful than you. The bullied child need not become the teenage bully.

If we truly embrace its principles, a Homeless Bill of Rights can unite us all and get us working together for a government that affirms that a healthy, housed and educated people is a righteous responsibility for governments to undertake.

Street Spirit

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Editor, Layout: Terry Messman
Web designer: Ariel Messman-Rucker

Contributors: Linda Atkins, David Bacon, Claire J. Baker, Jack Bragen, Joan Clair, Horace Cort, Kitty Costello, Jack Hirschman, Christa Occhiogrosso, Michael L. Palmer, Carlos Ramirez, Raven, Robert L. Terrell, Howard Tharsing, WRAP, George Wynn

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***Contact*: Terry Messman**
Street Spirit, 65 Ninth Street, San Francisco, CA 94103
***E-mail*: spirit@afsc.org**
***Web:* http://www.thestreetspirit.org**

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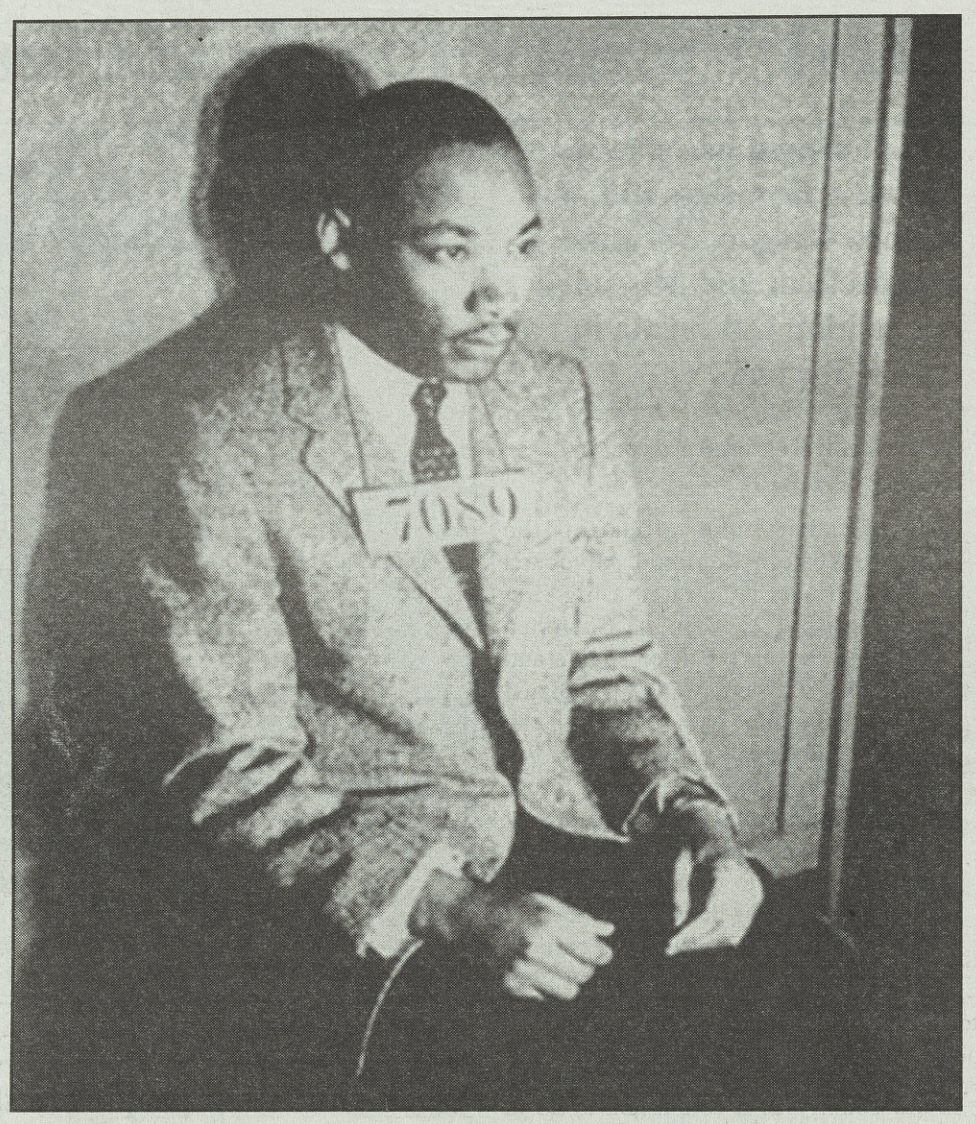
Vincent Harding and the Legacy of the Southern Freedom Movement

"I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out of the sunlight of opportunity."

— Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1966



Prisoner #7089, Martin Luther King, Jr., has his mug shot taken by police after he was arrested during the Montgomery bus boycott.

from page 1

and Rosemarie founded Mennonite House, a gathering place for movement activists in Atlanta, and traveled throughout the South in the 1960s, working with King and the SCLC in the freedom struggle as activists and nonviolence trainers and teachers.

Almost from the very beginnings of his life as an activist, Harding understood the deep connections between working for peace and seeking racial and economic justice. He was dedicated to challenging discrimination and segregation, while simultaneously working for peace and nuclear disarmament.

In the early 1960s, peace activism was still relatively rare in the United States, yet Harding's two-fold commitment to ending war and overcoming segregation already was evident in the summer of 1962. That year, Harding became involved in the Albany Movement, a broad-based campaign of nonviolent resistance aimed at overturning the segregation laws in Albany, Georgia, and he was arrested for leading a demonstration at Albany City Hall in July 1962. Only two months later, in September 1962, he also was active with the Greater Atlanta Peace Fellowship in protesting the nuclear arms race.

Today, Harding continues to illuminate the connections between seeking peace and working for social justice. He has written eloquently about how Martin Luther King was dedicated to simultaneously resisting the "triple evils" of racism, militarism and economic exploitation.

FREEDOM MOVEMENT'S LEGACY

The Southern Freedom Movement left an enduring legacy in its valiant campaigns to overcome a brutal and seemingly all-powerful form of segregation that Harding unhesitatingly calls a "terroristic system" of violent subjugation.

Nonviolent activists not only made history by challenging the brutal system of racial oppression in America, but the Movement's legacy extends far beyond the struggle for equal rights, and reaches far beyond the shores of our own nation.

In his book, *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement,* Vincent Harding describes vividly how the legacy of the Freedom Movement has transcended its era and transformed the world.

In 1989, as Chinese students occupied Tiananmen Square in Beijing as part of a nonviolent movement for freedom and democracy in their country, they constantly displayed the unforgettable words of the Freedom Movement's own anthem, "We Shall Overcome" — words that Harding and thousands of his fellow activists had sung in countless marches for justice.

Those three powerful words that had expressed so well the heart of a generation's courageous struggle for freedom in America were now giving strength to a struggle for freedom decades later and thousands of miles away, in China.

"We Shall Overcome." Those three words were displayed defiantly on many banners waving above the demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, were imprinted on shirts bravely worn by protesting Chinese students, and were declared boldly on leaflets that voiced the ideals and hopes of this democracy movement.

The electrifying message of a movement originally born in the oppressive heat of terribly costly human rights struggles in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee, had now leapt across the oceans and, ignoring all barriers of time and distance, had miraculously galvanized other hope-filled freedom movements in such far-flung countries as China, South Africa, the Philippines and Poland.

For many veterans of the Southern Freedom Movement, it was an experience of amazing grace to see the inspiration of their home-grown movement ignite the hopes of millions of people waging crucial struggles for freedom overseas.

In his book, *Hope and History,* he wrote: "The Chinese students seemed to be saying that they recognized and were inspired by the power of our African-American struggle. Their signs were new evidence and confirmation for us, if we needed it, that this American freedom movement of the post-World War II period was no relatively narrow contest for the 'civil rights' of Black people alone, important and endangered though those rights were and still are. The life-risking students in Tiananmen Square were claiming our movement for what it really was: an epic, life-affirming, nonviolent struggle for the expansion of democracy, a great contribution to the twentieth century's movements for human renewal and social transformation."

MORE THAN CIVIL RIGHTS

The Freedom Movement launched by African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s now had become a shining lesson for the whole world. That is one reason why Harding continues to stubbornly insist that naming this epochal struggle for freedom and democracy "the civil rights movement" does not do full justice to what was truly at stake.

Instead, he has long described it as the "Southern-based, Black-led, Freedom Movement," because it had more far-reaching goals than simply winning legalistic victories to protect a narrowly conceived notion of civil rights. As Harding explained in our interview, the full measure of what was really at stake was captured far more evocatively in the words of another of the Movement's powerful anthems: "Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on *freedom*."

As Harding continues to think and teach and write about this momentous struggle for freedom, he has gone beyond his own formulation, and now sees the Movement as nothing less than an historic effort to expand and deepen democracy for all people. Perhaps that helps explain why this movement has so much power to inspire activists all over the globe as they struggle to deepen freedom and expand democracy in their own countries.

As a scholar, university professor, theologian and author, Harding has now devoted much of his life to teaching about the meaning of the Freedom Movement. His insights into the very heart of the Movement are as meaningful for activists today as they were during the struggles for freedom in the 1950s and 1960s in Birmingham, Montgomery, Albany, Selma, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

After Martin Luther King's assassination, Harding worked with Coretta Scott King and was named as the first director of the Martin Luther King Jr., Memorial Center. He also served as senior academic consultant to the highly acclaimed PBS television series on the history of the Freedom Movement, "Eyes on the Prize" and "Eyes on the Prize II."

Harding taught at the University of Pennsylvania, Spelman College, Swarthmore College, and Pendle Hill, a Quaker study and retreat center, and then taught theology at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver from 1981 to 2004.

Harding is the author of several influential books, including *There Is A River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America,* a seminal study of the long decades of struggle by African Americans to overcome slavery and keep their dreams of liberation alive. Harding also authored two illuminating reflections on the meaning of the Freedom Movement for today's struggles against injustice: *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero,* and *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement.*

In these books, Harding describes King's deepening dedication to the radical transformation of our society, a journey that led far beyond the March on Washington in 1963 when Martin captivated the nation with the soaring eloquence of his "I Have A Dream" speech.

A TRULY PROPHETIC FIGURE

In the final months of his life, in 1967 and 1968, King had grown into a radicalized and truly prophetic figure who had committed himself heart and soul to fighting the "triple evils" of militarism, racism and economic exploitation. In publicly opposing the Vietnam War and in his courageous attempts to build a Poor People's Campaign, King had set out on a showdown with what he was now calling "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world" — the federal government. It was a costly decision and a fateful journey — one that ended in his assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

In *The Inconvenient Hero,* Harding confronts readers with that prophetic and revolutionary Martin Luther King who had made what he calls "an essentially religious commitment" to the poor at home and to ending the war in Vietnam.

In simple words that are nonetheless among the most profound and prophetic words I know, Dr. King described his vision of solidarity with the poor in 1966.

King said, "I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out of the sunlight of opportunity...

"If it means sacrificing, I'm going that way. If it means dying for them, I'm going that way, because I heard a voice saying, 'Do something for others.'"

That is who Martin Luther King had become: A man who was, at one and the same time, a pastor, a prophet and a nonviolent revolutionary.

THE PREACHER AND THE EMPIRE

Harding's writings offer important insights into King's startling growth into something far more revolutionary than the dreamer of 1963. Now, he was the preacher who would bring down an empire, the radicalized King who still believed in the dream of equal rights for all, but who had shown the steely resolve to take on poverty, slums, hunger and the Vietnam War.

In his last year on earth, King had become a man of destiny with a burning drive to confront the federal government in a showdown in Washington, D.C., and force government officials to hear the cry of the poor for justice.

That is why the *Street Spirit* interview began by asking Harding to reflect on the final year of his friend's life on earth.

I interviewed Vincent Harding on April 23 while he was visiting the Bay Area with his "beloved" Aljosie Aldrich Knight, in his words. Harding responded to every question by first closing his eyes and remaining in contemplative silence, then thoughtfully answering with beautifully articulated reflections that seemed to come from some deep place within.

Street Spirit is grateful to nonviolent activists David Hartsough and Sherri Maurin for their generous help in arranging the following interview.

At the end of the session, David Hartsough said in gratitude that the interview had been "profound." Harding's reflections were, in fact, a profoundly insightful meditation on the heart and soul of the Freedom Movement, then and now.

The *Street Spirit* Interview with Vincent Harding

Interview by Terry Messman

Street Spirit: *In your book,* Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero, *you wrote that the public seems most aware of the first part of Dr. King's journey that culminated in his "I have a dream" speech during the March on Washington in August 1963. Yet, in the final year of his life, King attempted to build a far more militant movement that could challenge racism, the war in Vietnam, poverty, unemployment and slum housing. What are your reflections on Martin Luther King in the last year of his life?*

Vincent Harding: Well, Terry, I think that he was, as much as anything else, a man in search. He was not simply repeating himself, but trying to develop himself. It was clear that he was responding to the world that he was living in, and the world that was coming into being all around him. I think that that element of being engaged with the world as it was developing is one of the most important things that I would see.

He was trying to speak to the developing Black consciousness that was rising up in the Black community. He was trying to speak to the younger people who probably, even more than they knew it, were responding themselves to the society's tendency to see them simply as waste material. He was trying to understand ways in which he could help those young people to see a sense of purpose for their lives, beyond the explosive kinds of actions that they were engaged in, in the urban areas of this country.

And then, of course, he was trying to respond to his country's imperialism and militarism. And that was something that he simply could not let pass him by. It was absolutely necessary to speak to what that militarism was doing to the country — especially as expressed in Vietnam.

Because he was a deep lover of his country, he felt that there would be no way in which he could be a person of integrity, and be silent about the damage that he saw us, as a nation, inflicting on ourselves and on other people.

And, of course, in the midst of this period, he also tried to figure out how the wealthiest country in the world could respond to the growing damage that it was doing to its poor people. That whole question of poverty, and the response to poverty and the response to the poor, is another element, I would say, of his overwhelming concern.

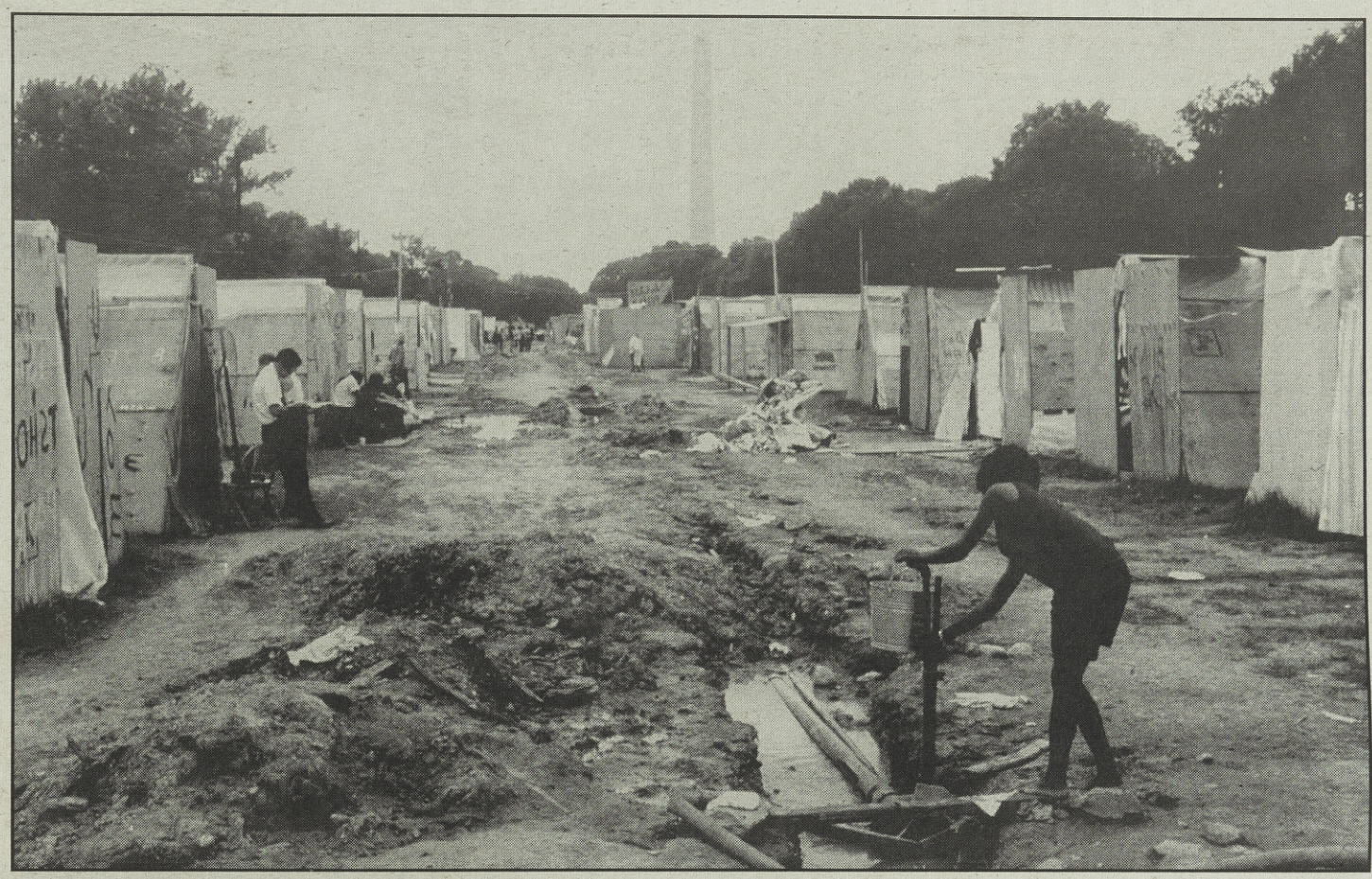
I'd like to mention one other thing, though. And that is that if we're talking about that last year, he is really constantly trying to understand what would nonviolent revolution be like in America. And, at least as important, how would he call the angry, explosive, young people into that kind of task — for the good of the country, for the good of themselves, for the good of the world.

This whole matter of the young people — their explosive energy somehow being called into participation in a nonviolent revolutionary change and struggle — that was something that was very much on his mind and heart, and that needs to be seen as crucial to those last years.

Spirit: *In* The Inconvenient Hero, *you wrote, "By the time the garbage workers called him to Memphis, he saw their struggles as part of the work of peace. For peace was linked to economic justice and the radical redistribution of wealth, nationally and internationally."*

How had King's vision of economic justice evolved in that last year, and why did he come to see that economic justice is inseparable from the work for peace?

Harding: I think that at the heart of his wrestling with these issues, was a concern for the development of the best humanity in us all. What he saw in what we were doing — and not doing — to and with the poor was a kind of ignoring of their needs for their best human development. And a failure to recognize that if their needs were not spoken to, the country itself would suffer.



Activists built Resurrection City on the Washington Mall during the Poor People's Campaign in 1968 to make the suffering and inhumanity of poverty visible. A few spigots provided the only water available to the encampment. Photo by Ollie Atkins

> **"King was always concerned about giving healing attention to the problems of poverty, homelessness, brokenness in America."**
> — Vincent Harding

Whenever he talked about the necessary kind of housing that human beings needed, he always put it in that context: What kind of housing could help develop people's best humanity? Obviously, that was not something that could be done in barracks-like towers. He was always asking: What was the kind of housing that could help nurture individual and collective humanity?

All of these things were hooked together for him so that, for instance, when he was working with the young people in their various explosive parts of the country, he was always knowing that they were an expression of the American tendency towards violent solutions. In a sense, they were being *very* American in the explosiveness of their response to their situation. To speak adequately to issues of peace, one had to speak directly to the elements of our society that did not make for peace, but that made for conflict and made for a sense of desperation.

I remember the story that Andy Young told me of what happened when Martin went out to Watts in response to that explosion. [The six-day Watts riots, or Watts rebellion, began on August 11, 1965, in the Watts area of Los Angeles, triggered when the police arrested a young, African American man, Marquette Frye.]

When he got out there, Martin did not have any kind of plan in his mind. He simply knew that he needed to be out there in the midst of those young people, especially young men, and their sense of a need to explode. As he was talking to them, he was visiting while their communities were still living with the smoke all around them. Martin was asking them, essentially, to talk to him about why they felt that they had done this. And one of the young men said to him, "We won!"

In 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. displays a poster for the Poor People's Campaign led by SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference). AP photo: Horace Cort

Martin said, "What do you mean, you won? Look at your community, look at your neighborhoods, with the flames still practically consuming them."

And the young man said, "Well, at least we got them to pay attention to us."

Now to me, that's one of the most poignant statements to come out of that whole period. These young men were responding in a very human way to the lack of attention to their needs. They knew that nobody was paying humane attention to them — police attention, yes, but not the healing attention. King was always concerned about giving healing attention to the problems of poverty, homelessness, brokenness, in American society.

Spirit: *Poor and homeless people universally report, sometimes in despair, that they are not being heard, and that they are nearly invisible. Poverty casts people into oblivion. Was that why the Poor People's Campaign tried to make legislators finally pay attention by forming an encampment of poor people in their midst?*

Harding: What King was hoping for was not simply that those of us who were more advanced, progressive, and humane would camp the poor people in the midst of Washington's inattention. What he was ultimately getting at was that the poor people would camp *themselves* there — that they would, through their own actions, come and say, "You must deal with us. We are part of this country!" I think it was so important to keep that element of self-affirmation, and self-recognition.

So it was not simply King as a miracle worker doing something *for* them. Martin was constantly trying to figure out how he could do something *with* them — so they could know that this was really *their* Poor People's Movement. It was not a movement developed by the non-poor for the poor, but he was trying to help them understand that this was their movement, and that was a necessary development in order for poverty to be overcome in American society.

Spirit: *What did you personally think of the plans for a Poor People's Campaign at the time, in 1968, and what do you think of it now, in retrospect?*

Harding: The logic of what Martin and others who were working with him, like Marian Wright Edelman [a civil rights activist who helped organize the Poor People's Campaign in 1968 and founded the Children's Defense Fund in 1973], were feeling, is a logic that makes great sense. They were saying on a deep level: "The poor, who have been pushed aside from the priorities of the country, have to push for a rethinking of, or a repositioning of, their condition in the country's agenda."

They were saying some things I know I have thought about much more recently than I was thinking about it then, but it seems to make sense to me now: The Poor People's Movement was trying to take

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seriously the whole idea of the preamble to the Constitution: "We, the people of the United States," have as our major job the creation of "a more perfect union." Poor people were being encouraged to recognize that they were "We, the people"— and that they could address those who were not working for a more perfect union, and who were working on all kinds of other agendas, some of them called "stopping Communism."

The Poor People's Movement was essentially saying, "America, our major task is to create a more perfect union." That's what we Americans are supposed to be for. And we can't have a more perfect union with the kind of poverty that benights our society everywhere — Mississippi, Chicago, Los Angeles, and elsewhere.

So I think at that time, though I may not have put it in those words, I was fairly clear that it was the right thing to do — to try to organize poor people to challenge our government about what are the most important kinds of works that the government of this country should be devoted to.

And it is still, I think, a magnificent challenge. Because one of the things that comes very, very clear to me in the 21st century is that it is really impossible to develop an imperial-power country stretching its tentacles, as it were, all over the world, and at the same moment, speak to the deepest needs of its own people.

That does not ever work, and it has never worked for any imperial power. And as long as we choose to be an imperial power, and as long as there is no counter-push against that, then we are headed towards real trouble.

King understood that, and that is why, among other reasons, he felt it was absolutely necessary to organize the poor, and to say — not just, "America, take care of your poor people" — but to say, "America, find your sense of direction. Find what you're really supposed to be existing for. You must give your attention to those who are poor, to those who are weak, to those who are broken in your own society, and not turn your major energy towards establishing yourself as the leader of the free world."

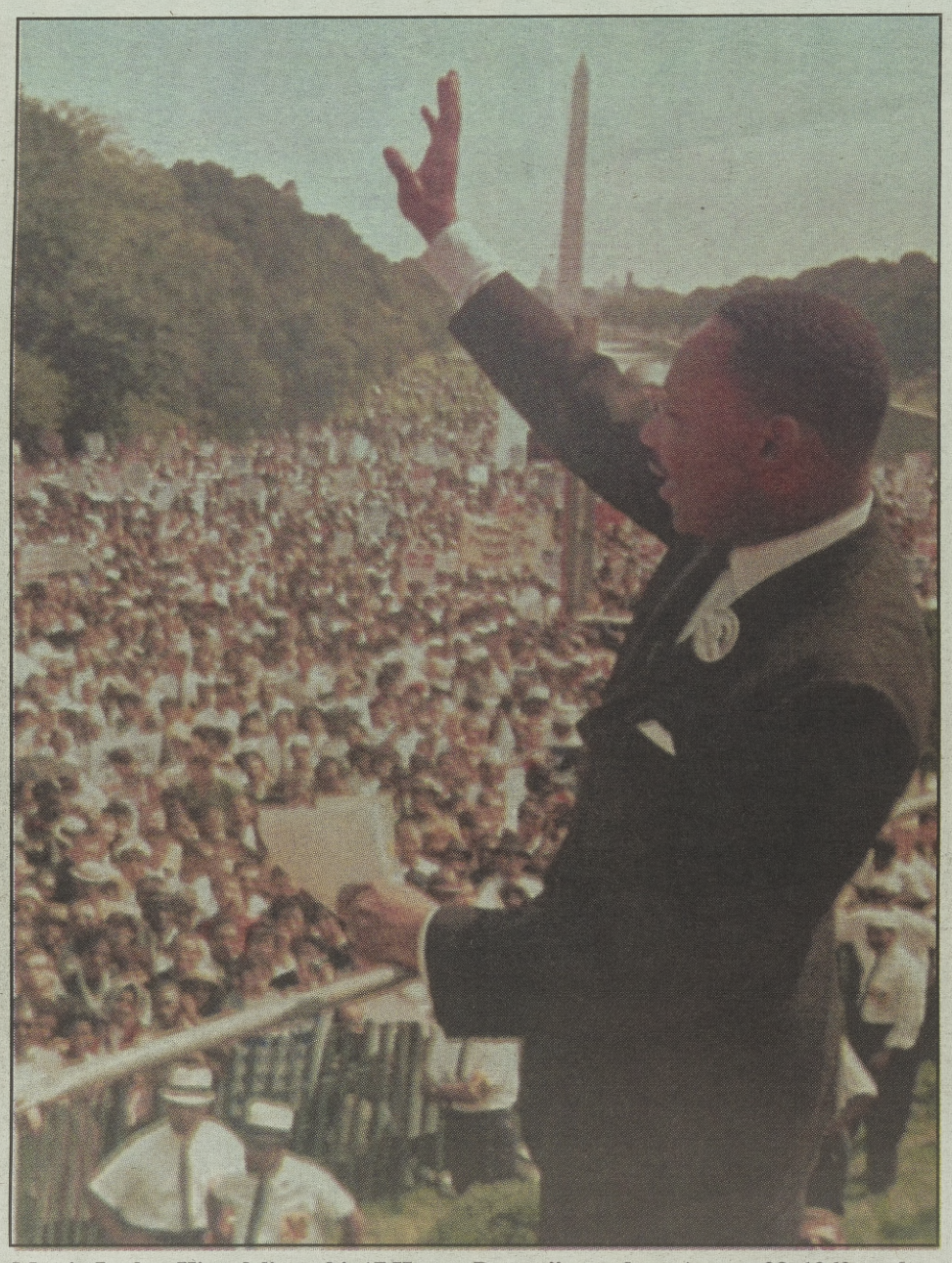
That is the challenge that King was putting forward. I think it is still a challenge that needs to be put forward — as much to (President Barack) Obama as it was to (then-President Lyndon) Johnson. That is a critical role that the poor, and the allies of the poor, can play, as King was trying to set forward back in 1968.

Spirit: *You wrote, "His call was an urgent invitation to turn sharply away from our commitment to an ever-ascending higher standard of living and to set our faces in compassion toward the poor of every color, of every land."*

Yet, even today, seeking justice for the poor seems to be nearly the last priority even for progressive activists. Can you tell us what led King — on a personal level, or a political or spiritual level — to feel this burning urgency to seek economic justice for the poor?

Harding: Although this is not necessarily a popular way to look at things, I think that, at this point in history, Martin was, as much as anything else, a deeply compassionate pastor. He saw himself, ultimately, as pastor to a country, and as one who tried to help the country develop its most humane possibilities. And he understood that we could not become our best and most humane self, as a country, if we ignored the poor.

Martin was very much attuned to the Hebrew prophets, and that was their constant message: Don't talk about loving God or being religious unless you stand *with the outcasts and the weak. Jesus said* the same thing.



Martin Luther King delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech on August 28, 1963, at the March on Washington. Vincent Harding writes that the nation fondly remembers his call to unity, but purposely ignores the more radical King of 1967-1968 who opposed the Vietnam war and was organizing a nonviolent rebellion to overcome poverty.

I think that there's no way to understand Martin's urgency about standing with the poor without taking into consideration his deepest religious and spiritual grounding. There's no way to understand King, the human rights leader, without seeing first — as he tried to say in his Vietnam speech — King, the pastor, the follower of Jesus, King, the believer in the family of God, the community of God.

He was just, in many ways, a radical humanist, a radical believer in the family of God. I choose that word more and more, rather than the kingdom of God, because I think in a democratic society, that's not where we ought to be placing our descriptive attention. King believed in the family of God, that God the Almighty was indeed our parent and that we were meant to relate to each other as sisters and brothers. So I think that is a deep part of what we have to look at in order to able to respond to your question, Terry.

Spirit: *In your view, what happened with Resurrection City in Washington, D.C., in the aftermath of King's assassination? I know there was still a wonderful statement of resistance. But just looking at the news coverage of people trudging on, trying to soldier on at that moment, I wonder how heartbroken they were. I know the movement was far larger than just this one leader, it was made up of all the thousands of people that came to D.C. But did that assassination break people's hearts and demoralize them? Or did they just run into the terribly repressive power of the federal government?*

Harding: I certainly feel that Martin's assassination did break the hearts of many, many of the folks who were involved in the organizing of that attempt of the movement. In addition to that, the federal government clearly was seeking, by both obvious and subversive methodologies, to undermine that organizing as much as they possibly could.

And then, of course, it rained and rained. That was a very important part of the breaking of people's spirits too.

I think that one of the factors that we always have to look back on is that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and its allies had never attempted to organize something that today we would call "Occupy D.C." The kind of planning that was necessary for the carrying out of "Occupy D.C." simply had not been done in the midst of everything else — especially, of course, in the midst of the response to the assassination.

So there were all kinds of things that were going on that made it impossible to focus the kind of planning on the Poor People's Campaign that was required. It was a great experiment in American social movements. And like all experiments, it could fail or succeed. Most of what happened in terms of its goals was not a success.

But the idea itself of black, white, brown, red, poor people coming together to challenge the country around the issue of poverty was a powerful idea that, in many ways, without copying it, needs to be paid attention to at this point in American history — especially in the light of the kind of consciousness that Occupy has helped to raise in the country concerning economic oppression and the deep unfaithfulness to the needs of the country's poorest people and its middle-class people, who I am less anxious about than I am about the poor.

Spirit: *I'm still blown away by that revolutionary vision. It's still breathtaking to me that the SCLC dreamed up a showdown with the federal government in a way that could conceivably have forced the government to grant the Economic Bill of Rights. What do you think King would say today about the historic levels of poverty in America?*

Harding: I need to go back for just a

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moment and see the Poor People's Campaign as not exclusively Martin Luther King, because the whole idea of that kind of campaign for the movement came out of not only a Marian Wright Edelman, but even before that, out of a James Lawson and James Bevel and Diane Nash. I think it's psychologically and historically important to keep reminding ourselves that we do not need to wait for another Martin Luther King, Jr.

What we have to keep recognizing is that those ideas came out of a *community* of people. And now we need to refocus ourselves on the concerns and the commitment that this community represented and that Martin so wonderfully explicated for the country and the world. I have a great concern that we take seriously the words that a wonderful poet from this part of the country wrote: "We are the ones we have been waiting for."

Spirit: *The words of June Jordan.*

Harding: Yes. I would want to stubbornly insist that we do not tie the Poor People's Campaign only to Martin because, in a deep sense, Martin will never return. But there are people who can, in a sense, show up, and we have to spend as much time as we can figuring out what it means to talk in the 21st century about the issue of organizing the poor.

The most important thing now is not how do we repeat King's actions, accomplishments, and concerns, but how do we nurture the issues that were part of the community that he was a part of, the community of those who saw the need for a more perfect union. And we saw that there could not be a more perfect union unless the needs and the possibilities of the people that we call poor were brought into the life of the democracy.

In response to the question you raised of what would King be thinking, feeling, saying in response to what is going on now, I think that in the light of what we said about who he was, and where his concerns came from, and who he was focused on, it's pretty obvious that he would still be saying what he was saying at the end of his life: "America, you must be born again. You cannot continue without being reborn, and if you're not reborn, you're headed towards a terrible, terrible death."

I think he would be saying that out of love, and out of deep commitment to the possibilities of this country, and out of a deep, deep belief that the country does not have to give in to what he called the triple evils that were so dangerous to us: racism, materialism and militarism. All over, if he were around today, he would see the continuing manifestation of the triple evils.

And he would probably be trying to figure out where are the folks who are trying to work on these things, and if he had the capacity to, he would be joining those people and encouraging those people: "Work on, work on!"

Spirit: *What could a Poor People's Movement look like today? Is the Occupy Movement a good example of how it could emerge?*

Harding: Whenever I hear a question like that, my mind goes immediately to something that one of your fellow Californians wrote to some of us elders a

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few months ago. Gus Newport wrote these words: "The great American experiment in building a multiracial democracy is still in the laboratory."

I find that a source of great encouragement. At this stage in my life, and in the life of the country, and in the lives of those of us who are concerned about building a community of God's children, I find it very important that we don't have to know exactly how to do that yet. But what we do have to know is that we *must* do that. And that has become the most important thing. Not in the way of, "What is the answer?" But how do we nurture the question in such a way that we can work together on these issues?

I've been thinking and talking a great deal with my beloved Aljosie about some of the things that are so clearly needed in America today. We were just looking at an article about the needs of the elderly. There are so, so many more of us now. That whole arena of how to deal with the elderly is an amazing area of need. At the same moment, it is clear that at least as much energy and creativity have to go in to how do you help children to become whole, humane, human beings? And how do you build cities that will encourage human development?

All of these kinds of issues, and a thousand more that focus on the creation of a more perfect union, for me, are part of what surrounds that question of organizing the poor. Organizing the poor is one central, crucial matter. The larger question is organizing "We, the people" to create a more perfect union. It has to do with the care of the children. It has to do with the care of the elderly. It has to do with the care of the so-called disabled.

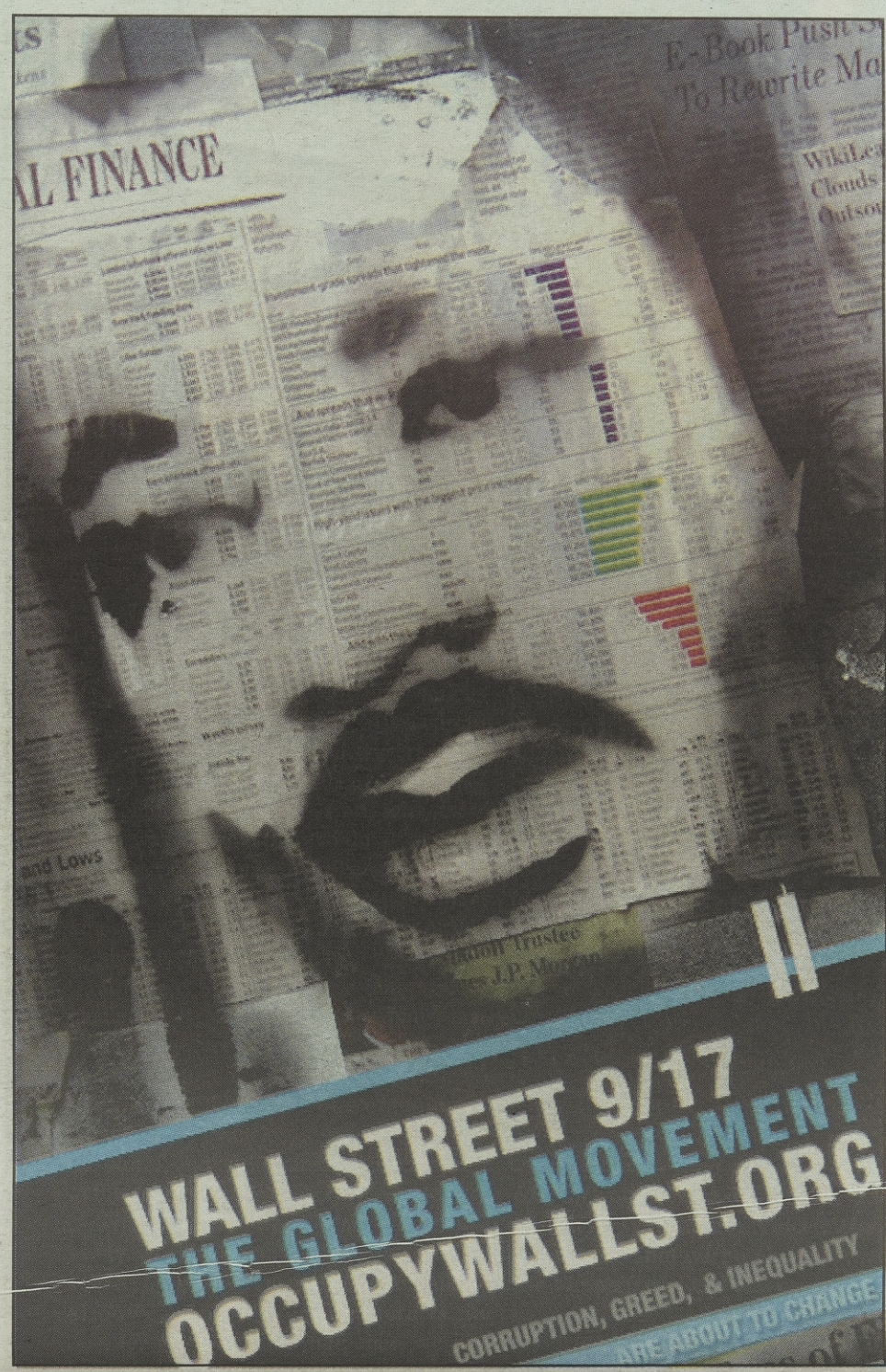
All sorts of things that need our focus and our attention are present as challenges, and I think as wonderful challenges to move us towards the kinds of things where King and the movement were saying to us: "Stop acting like we are in charge of the world, and act in faithfulness to our responsibility to create a more perfect union."

I keep thinking of my president now when I say this: There are all kinds of ways in which, if we paid attention, and made this the focus of our attention, rather than lots of other things — materialistic and militaristic things — that we give attention to, if we made the nurturing of a democratic country our focus of attention, it would be amazing to ask what the possibilities are that could grow out of this.

In a way, it's connected to Gandhi's statement that we would be amazed by the new discoveries in destructive military forces — and what would Gandhi have to say about drones, for instance — but at the same moment, he said we can also allow ourselves to be amazed and surprised about the advances that could be made in nonviolent healing forces.

For those of us who see ourselves in the realm of the nonviolent forces, not only should we continue to call our country and our fellow citizens to move against the things that make for damage to human beings, but we've got to encourage ourselves to see the possibilities that there are to create alternatives. We need to create more communities of hope and more communities of experimentation in nonviolent struggle.

Remember, we started this conversation with the fact that Martin was still, to the very end, trying to understand what would nonviolent revolution in America be like, and who would take the leadership. I think that is still the challenge to us — that even though it is scary, or maybe *because* it's scary, it's exactly what we need to keep our minds on.



This poster from the Occupy Movement updates Martin Luther King's image to confront present-day Wall Street. Poster art by Kevin Vancio originally published in Adbuster

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Spirit: *You have written that calling it "the Civil Rights Movement" doesn't do full justice to what was really at stake. Why does calling it "the Freedom Movement" better express the spirit of that community of resistance?*

Harding: You've actually caught me in the midst of continuing to rethink what is the best terminology, and I'd like to suggest where I am at this particular time. Let me mention to you something about "the Freedom Movement" first. I feel that one of the ways in which people in movements most deeply express themselves is in what they sing about. We sang in the South not, "Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on civil rights..."

Spirit: *"Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on* **freedom**."

Harding: Again and again, when we needed one word to say what it was that we were struggling for, that word was ***freedom***. I think we need to give the initiative in identifying the movement to the people who were part of the movement, and who expressed themselves not necessarily in 47-page essays, but in one song, one line, one statement. That's one of the reasons why I think that is so important.

Having said that, I also feel that those of us who do write 47-page essays have a responsibility to try to say what we think was going on. For me, it seems very, very clear that the idea of a "civil rights movement" is not adequate to describe what was going on.

I take my prompts from a couple of directions. One is, as you may know, when Martin and folks like Ella Baker and Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and others started the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, they did not say, "We've come to work for civil rights." They said, "We have come to redeem the soul of America."

For me, that brings us much closer to what I understand the movement to be best described by. These days, I like to speak of it as "the Southern-based, Black-led movement for the expansion and deepening of democracy in America."

That way, it's not just about Black people and our rights. It's not just about anybody and our rights. It's about democracy — building the forces, the reality of democracy in America.

I like that, because then it's not a question of, "What civil rights should we work for now?" But it's a question of, "In what ways must democracy be deepened and expanded now?" And every generation can ask that — not copying something that was done 25 or 55 years ago — but in its own given moment, again, as happened with Occupy: What must be done to deepen and expand democracy?

I think it's a wonderful question to put on each generation's agenda: to let each generation know that the movement was not something that simply began and ended in the 1960s and 1970s, but the movement is an ongoing movement of "We, the people, to create a more perfect union." And for me, a more perfect union is a more democratic union. It is a union in which all of our great variety of racial, ethnic groupings can be opened to something that has never existed before.

I am sorry to give you another thing to think about beyond freedom, but I am almost obsessed by the question of what is necessary to build democracy in America. I think we're in great danger. If we don't build it, we go backwards.

Listen to all this discussion about what we should do with our schools. Almost everybody is talking about schools only as a place where you go to learn how to make money. What if we thought about our schools as places where you learn how to become democratic citizens? How do you prepare young people to become democratic citizens?

Spirit: *Yes. How can schools prepare students for freedom — not just free enterprise. You wrote that taking part in the Freedom Movement was a transforming experience for many churches, and that many of them went on to get involved in other struggles for peace and justice in years to come. Can you explain why the movement had such a strong base in the Black churches and why church members were so much at the forefront of the movement? Why were those the people that were really on the move?*

Harding: Because those were the people in this country who always understood that Jesus belonged to them — and who understood that any religion that was based on slavery could not be a real religion. So here is that song again. The original words of that song, as you may know, were: "Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus."

They understood that Jesus and freedom were the same thing, so they understood the call of the movement as something that was simply part of the call and response to Jesus. Jesus was the heart of freedom where they were concerned. It was Jesus who said, "Deal with the needs of the poor and the outcast."

They were the group in the country who, in their religion, were closest emotionally, physically and theologically tied to Jesus. So when you get a movement that starts projecting the same kind of calling that Jesus brought forth, these folks know: "That's our man, this is where we belong. Let's get out there."

Spirit: *Last night I again watched the PBS documentary on the Freedom Riders as they came into Birmingham, Alabama, and were met with the sickening level of violence and hatred that white people inflicted on black and white freedom riders. In* Hope and History, *you called it "the terroristic system of American segregation." Can you help us understand how people found the strength to continue in the movement even after so many were clubbed by police, attacked by mobs, assassinated, and bombed in their churches and their homes?*

Harding: I think they found strength in each other. They found it in each other. They found it in the wonderful vision that they had of what could come beyond. And they found it in the internal resources that, for some of them, was religion, Christianity. For some of them, it was deep humanistic faith and belief in, again, the family of God. And some of them found it simply because they were determined that they were not going to let white racists turn them around.

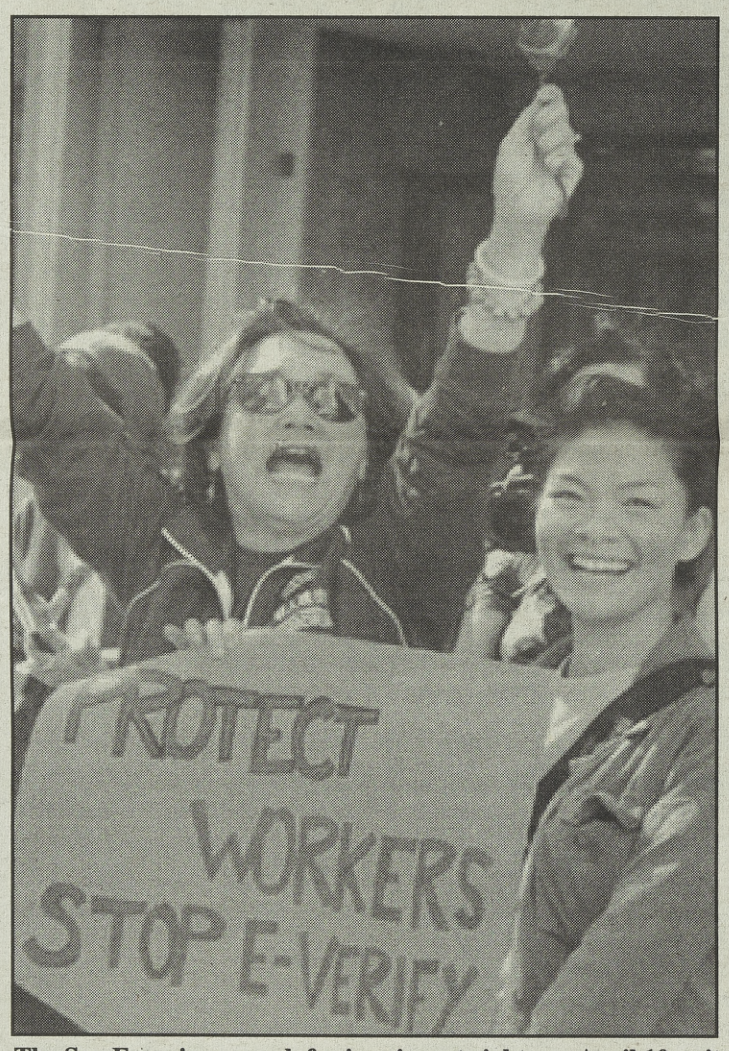
Spirit: *Thank you, Vincent!*
Harding: Thank you, Terry.

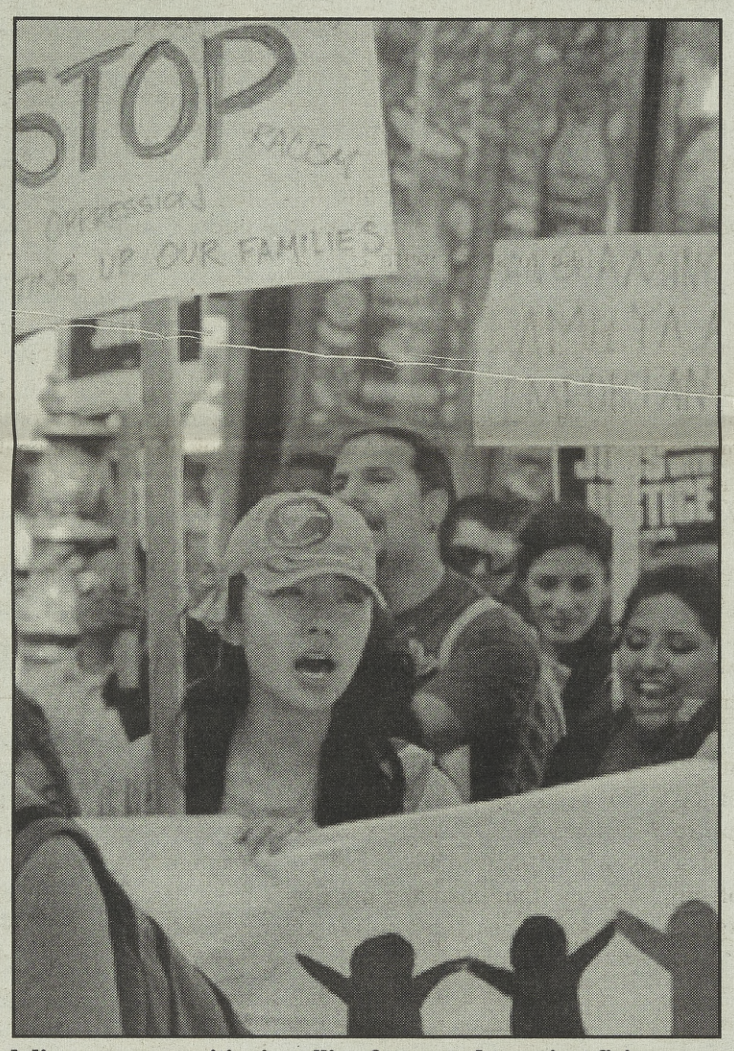
Demands Rise on Congress to Uphold Immigrant Rights

"Their firing is a violation of their human rights. When they say that raids are targeting criminals, it's not true. People who are just trying to make a living are being targeted big time."

— Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin

Jefferson Elementary students call on President Obama to allow the Mendoza family to come back to Berkeley. David Bacon photo





The San Francisco march for immigrant rights on April 10 united diverse communities in calling for an end to unjust firings.

Story and photos by David Bacon

In San Diego, nine activists completed six days of a hunger strike outside the Mission Valley Hilton Hotel on April 10 — the day demonstrations took place across the United States demanding immigration reform. Hunger strikers were protesting the firing of 14 of the hotel's workers, after Evolution Hospitality, the company operating the Hilton franchise, told them that it had used the government's E-Verify database to determine that they didn't have legal immigration status.

"The company says that E-Verify is making them do this, even though many of the workers have been working here for years," said Sara Garcia, a supporter and hunger striker from House of Organized Neighbors, a local community organization. "But they started firing them when the workers were organizing a union."

"I clean 16 to 18 rooms a day, and they pay me $8.65 an hour. No one can live on that," explained Leticia Nava, a fired worker. " I'm a widow with three children who depend on me. What is happening is not just. We are immigrant workers, and the only thing we're asking is to work. That's not hurting anyone."

Garcia and Nava accuse the company of using the government system for immigration enforcement in the workplace, a database called E-Verify, in order to retaliate against 14 women for their union support. But they also say that the E-Verify system is used much more extensively, to fire workers even where no union organizing is taking place.

"Many companies are doing the same thing," Nava charged. "They're manipulating the system because what they're really interested in is low wages. This isn't the first time this happened to me. I was fired the same way two years ago. Now my children are all scared because they see it's harder for me every day. Tomorrow I'll have to go out and find another job, and E-Verify makes that more and more difficult. The impact on us is not just money — it affects all aspects of my life."

Nava and Garcia joined the tens of thousands of immigrants and immigrant rights activists who demonstrated on April 10, calling for the reform of U.S. immigration laws. Yet on the same day, legislators drafting reform proposals in the U.S. Senate proposed changes that would make Nava's experience more widespread than ever, which were then contained in a bill they introduced a week later.

Both Garcia and Nava agreed that getting rid of E-Verify should be part of immigration reform. "This part of the law is inhumane and unjust," Garcia said. "It has economic, psychological and even moral effects. Instead of children worrying about schoolwork, they're worried about how they'll survive or even just eat." Nava declared simply, "This part of the law should be eliminated."

Congress, however, proposes to exact a price for the legalization of undocumented immigrants. The "Gang of Eight" senators drafting the reform bill announced that they intend to expand the E-Verify system to cover all employers, and make its use mandatory. This was only one of a number of measures that would increase the severity of many of the anti-immigrant measures already part of U.S. law.

The Hilton workers and their supporters, as well as the union helping them, UniteHere, all believe that immigration reform should include a legalization process. They want one that would give the 11-12 million undocumented people living in the United States a quick and accessible way to gain legal status. That demand ran through all of the hundreds of demonstrations around the country, from the 30,000 people on the mall in front of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., to the thousand marchers in downtown San Francisco. It was a demand voiced by hundreds of janitors and security guards in Silicon Valley, and by teachers and elementary school students in Berkeley.

The senators, however, are proposing a plan that would require undocumented people to spend a decade in a provisional status before even being able to apply for permanent legal residence. Then they would have to maintain that status for another three years before they could apply to become citizens, and gain basic political rights.

The citizenship process is so overloaded that processing applications now takes months, even years. And instead of anticipating the logistical bottleneck of millions of people applying for citizenship at the same time, the senators declared that legalization applicants would get no dedicated process.

People seeking legal status would have to "get in the back of the line" — their visa applications would be processed only after all other pending applications. That could have people waiting even more years. Today, the government is still processing visa applications for some relatives of U.S. citizens and residents that were filed over two decades ago. The undocumented would only become eligible for residence if they learned English, and were continuously employed for 10 years, or were family members of someone who was.

The senators further announced they would charge each applicant a penalty of $500 to file an application, another $500 six years later, and a further $1000 before they could apply for residence, on top of fees to cover the costs of the program. Leticia Nava, for instance, would have to raise $2000 right away for herself and her children, and would acquire an additional obligation of $6000 plus fees. At $8.65 an hour, paying it would be hard.

The idea of long waiting periods and obstacles was criticized by AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, who warned, "Families, including siblings and children, must not pay the price of our broken policies."

An even greater shift in U.S. immigration policy is in the works, however. The senators chipped away at the family preference system itself. They announced that there would no longer be a category allowing visa applications for the brothers and sisters of U.S. citizens. At the same time, their bill would create a new program eventually giving 120,000 visas a year to people with the work skills

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One-Way Ticket Home

I had to escape the straitjacket of street life. I was ready to go stark raving mad after 24 hours. City streets were no substitute for rural roads. I longed for my roots. I needed a breath of fresh country air. What else could I do?

by George Wynn

When I woke and discovered that my alarm clock had gone on the blink after faithful service for years on end, I knew that the meshuga demons from Franz Kafka's world were about to invade my reality. I could have said softly, "Bad omen," but instead I blurted it out with venom.

I tried to calm myself by reading the stanzas of the poet-doctor William Carlos Williams and tried to imagine myself writing poems on the backs of prescription pads while I tended to the poor in their third-floor, cold-water flats.

But to my dismay, I was unable to bring down my energy. Then a half-hour of Zen meditation. No relief. No, an omen is an omen, I was convinced. I was sitting on the toilet confessional immersed in the verse of Emily Dickinson when the incessant ringing of my phone abruptly uprooted me from the 19th century world of Amherst (my hometown and Emily's birthplace) and tranquil, picture-postcard Western Massachusetts.

With long, tremulous, pale-white fingers I grasped the phone and picked up.

"I would like to speak with Harvey Diamond," a man with a lofty voice said.

"Speaking," I answered.

"Sorry to relate bad news, Mister Diamond. But it seems the scholarship we offered you to our writers colony for a four-month residency was in error. Another applicant was actually selected before you. You're welcome to apply next year."

I wanted to blurt out, "You rotten bastard," but I restrained myself and asked softly, "How can that be?"

The administrator gave me a lengthy explanation that made no sense and he ended with, "I'm sorry."

I replied, "I'm more sorry than you," and put the receiver down solemnly and patted it as if consoling a small child who had scratched her knee.

For the next half-hour, I sliced the skin off my knuckles from pounding my fists against the wall with the vociferous mantra: "Rotten bastard."

I had already given my landlady notice that tomorrow I would be moving out of my rent-controlled, barred-window, basement cubicle. All I had was money for bus fare to the writers colony.

So on Sunday, I joined the world of drunks, blowhards, drug addicts, and down-and-outs who talk vaguely of making a fresh start in the world of work. I was determined not to stoop to the level of church soup kitchens. "Beyond my dignity. I'd rather starve." So I pontificated on day one. If I had to take life on the chin, I would stick my chin out like a defiant speaker on a soapbox. I'd had it with my pusillanimous ways.

After half a day, I learned that people on the street — unlike the middle class — have limited choices: It's either the shelter, abandoned buildings, junkyards, sleeping on the street, or if one is super-lucky, crashing at some generous person's pad.

The shelter was out for me. I'd heard one too many anecdotes of violence, showers that rarely work, and abusive staff, so I decided to take my chances sleeping on the streets. Growing up in New England, the cold doesn't bother me that much. After eight nights of shivering on hard asphalt assaulting my behind, I changed my mind.

"When will you go home?" asked the muscular cop, unlatching the nearly empty dumpster where I had spent several nights.

"It's only my second week on the streets," I said.

"Listen buddy, it's almost Christmas. You're new out here. Don't become one of the chronic ones. The city's giving out free bus tickets for visits home to their loved ones."

"Round trip?" I asked him.

"Who the hell said anything about round trip?" The cop cleared his throat. "You want to sleep in this stinking dumpster for another week? Here's my card if you change your mind. If I were you, I'd wake up and see the light before it's too late," he roared, as he clicked off his flashlight and walked away into the early morning dawn of the warehouse area.

I wandered around the Tenderloin with two duffel bags stuffed with clothes and unpublished manuscripts. I tried to make friends, but mostly, all I received were empty stares or chilling "whatevers."

I just didn't fit in because of my nerdy, spectacled, nebbish look. I didn't smoke pot anymore and I never drank. Only poets and bookish types like myself would converse with me, and they seemed to be a tiny minority.

I could feel the weight of the day resting heavy on my shoulders. The putrid stench of urine that hung in the air was sickening. In this world, I was completely shook up and emotionally unprepared.

Unlike prose or poetry, I had no confidence or understanding of the narrative and rhythms of the street. At times, it seemed there wasn't a sensitive soul in the entire god-forsaken Tenderloin.

When I encountered other homeless enclaves, under downtown expressways, in Golden Gate Park, or at the beach, I was not accepted either. The streets were alien to me. I was defenseless.

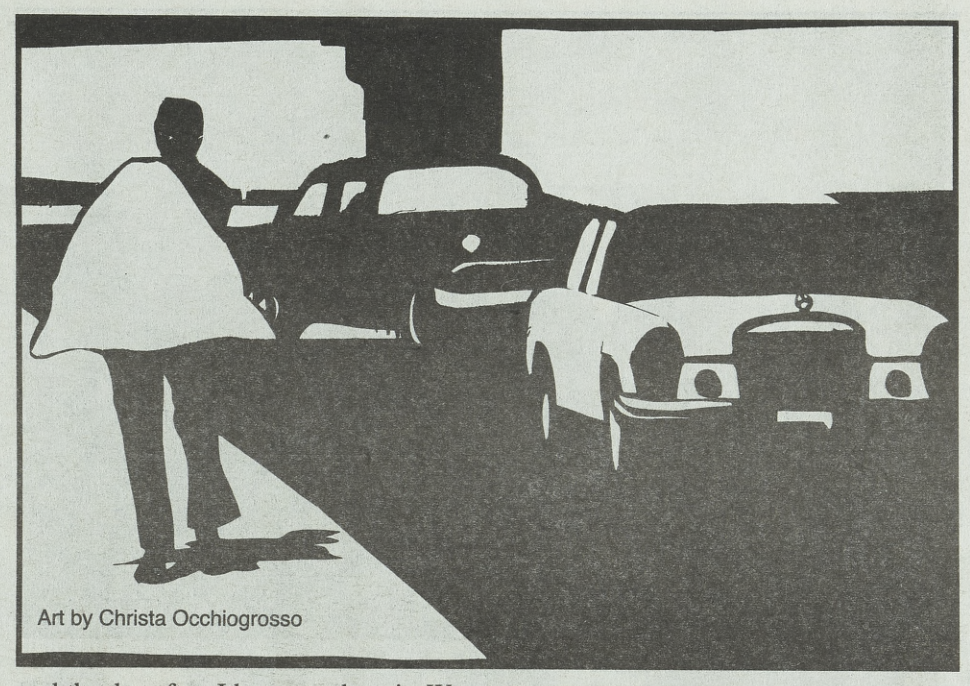
Cops and security guards hassled me for just being in a particular area or store and minding my own business. And when night descended, I was scared out of my wits sleeping in doorways. I became guarded and hyper-alert, trying to evade the hardcore with hair-trigger tempers. Moods changed fast and often, like models on a runway, from hilarious laughter to fists doubled and teeth clenched.

By the end of the week, my hundred dollars had almost run out. I had only 20 dollars left. Needing to let go of the tension that had accumulated in my head, I chanced on a bold outlet.

When a woman who looked like the Wicked Witch laid down her shopping bags laden with many sandwiches, and hitched up her skirt to piss on the street, I grabbed two of her sandwiches and ran off with her maddening curses at my back. I felt terrible. I'd lost control. My stupefied mind went flat — preoccupied with survival all the time. I was a prime candidate for anger management.

The next day, I lined up at St. Anthony's soup kitchen for lunch and dinner. I was not a strong-willed man. I was a phony artist. My lifelong quest was to be a writer and, enduring misery, all I could think about was myself, instead of jotting down heartfelt observations of the underclass. There was no time for introspection amidst urban manic fury.

I lied to myself. Street people seemed to be everything I was not. They lived for today. I'd always thought of tomorrow and the day after. I began to despair: Was I a real writer or a phony artist?



Art by Christa Occhiogrosso

I had to escape the straitjacket of street life. I was ready to go stark raving mad in 24 hours. City streets were no substitute for Western Massachusetts rural roads. I longed for my roots. I needed a breath of fresh country air. What else could I do?

I called my father collect. Dad could be as blunt as the anti-hero of his birthplace, Lizzie Borden. As a child, he remembered tossing stones at her house in Fall River. Now he hurled stones my way.

"So you couldn't make it as a writer," Dad said dryly. "Didn't I tell you? You shoulda listened. Ah, what the hell, you were always a horse's ass."

"I'm thinking of visiting for the holidays," I said with a lump in my throat.

"Really, after five years, that's so kind of you," he said.

"Forget I asked. Good bye."

"Wait," he said. "Things have changed. I broke both hips. I'm powering around the house in a wheelchair."

"Well, I could push you and make up stanzas in my mind," I replied.

"And you could cook for me, run my errands and do my laundry."

"Well, I kind of like independent living," I told him.

"Well, Mr. Independence, I don't like to pry but where are you living now?"

"Ugh. Ugh." That's all I could get out.

"I thought so, you shmuck you. Thought you could fool the old man, a veteran of the Battle of the Bulge."

In more ways than one, I thought to myself, picturing him watching television with a six-pack of Samuel Adams, patting his beer belly, rooting the Patriots on to victory. "So tell me, what cockamamie poem are you writing now? The Diary of a Homeless Man?" he persisted.

I didn't say anything.

"When can I expect you?" he asked, mellowing just a tad.

"Soon," I answered.

All I could think of was the card the cop gave me. I decided to call him. He told me to go to the welfare office at Eighth and Market in San Francisco.

Then-Mayor Gavin Newsom was returning the favor of New York mayors of the 1980s who had offered one-way tickets out of the Big Apple: "Go West, young man, and don't come back unless you have a bankroll to buy a basket of fruit daily."

Newsom's Care not Cash program, in effect, was actually no cash and no care. General Assistance recipients now received only 59 measly bucks and had to fight for a shelter bed. So there were takers for one-way mitzvah tickets out of the city that had become Bill O'Reilly's pet peeve.

On my way to the welfare office, I saw the woman whom I'd ashamedly named the Wicked Witch. I apologized, handed her five dollars, which meant I only had 15 dollars left. She grabbed the bill and screamed, "Asshole!" and walked off in a huff.

After loading up on four-for-a-dollar Walgreen's Hershey and Snickers bars, I realized how stupid I'd been to think that I was better than anyone else on the streets braving a similar ignominious existence and the primitive torments of survival.

The counselor called my father to find out if he could provide for me. My father gave his consent and the counselor drove me to the Transbay Terminal and paid for my Greyhound ticket, plus 20 dollars for food during my 72-hour trip. I boarded the bus breathing a sigh of relief: I had escaped the pernicious world of the streets.

In the middle of my journey, bored by the view of cornfields, I began to tinker with my alarm clock. Lo and behold, I got it to work for an hour, and then two and, when I woke up in Pittsburgh, it was working. Was it an auspicious omen? Could I also patch things up with my fastidious father?

I was happy to be coming back to the Bay State after all those years. I called Dad from the road. "I'm busy," he barked. "I'm watching a movie."

"Which one?"

"It's a Mad, Mad World," he said.

"It figures."

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Pittsburgh," I replied.

"Always the pits," he grumbled. "Hurry up. I could use a maid. I spilled beer all over my pants and stained them with spaghetti."

He hung up abruptly. His words struck me like Rocky Marciano punches to the rib cage. This might be a short visit.

Soon I'd be roaming the streets of my alma mater, Northeastern, and staying at the Y next door, off the money I'd borrow from my benevolent dad. And when the money ran out? I didn't want to think about that.

Hurrying Past a Brother or Sister

by Michael L. Palmer

On the way to work I saw a homeless man flatten a piece of cardboard he had retrieved from a recycling bin. With intense concentration he wrote on it his plea for survival.

I walked by another homeless man who was securing things to his bicycle. I think they were all of his worldly possessions. He complained, talking to the air surrounding him, about being harassed every morning by another man who stood in an alley across the street.

I watched people hurry along the sidewalk. I saw some of them descend below the street to the BART station where they will board a train that will take them to their place of work.

Hurrying to the train out of fear of becoming one of those who hold up a cardboard sign on the sidewalk, gazing into the eyes of those who pass by, hoping for salvation. Hurrying out of fear of becoming one of those they avoid, one of those they wished did not exist.

Berkeley teachers and the Alameda County Labor Council organized the students to come to the immigrant rights demonstration. David Bacon photo

Lorena Reyes marches for immigrant rights. She was fired from her job at the San Jose Hyatt Hotel because she supports the union and protested sexual harassment.

Demands Rise on Congress to Uphold Immigrant Rights

"We must confront authorities with stories of children's fearing that their parents might be taken away from them and deported. The voices of mothers whose children have been torn from their arms cannot be ignored."

— Father Jon Pedigo, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, San Jose

"In school we are learning about all these important people like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks who fought for people's civil rights and freedom. So what about Rodrigo's freedom? Who is fighting for his freedom?"

— Kyle Kuwahara, in a letter to Barack Obama on behalf of his friend Rodrigo Mendoza

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demanded by U.S. employers, rated on a point system. The undocumented could apply for these "merit-based" visas, but would compete against others.

This moves U.S. immigration policy backwards in time. Through the Cold War, it was structured to allow employers to bring workers, called braceros, to labor on the railroads and in the fields. At the same time, ferocious immigration enforcement led to the deportation of as many as a million immigrants a year — called "wetbacks" — who tried to work outside of that guest worker program. The civil rights movement abolished the bracero program, and with the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, a family-based system replaced it.

"Even before the braceros, we had contract labor, like the system that brought my ancestors, Chinese farmers, to build the railroads and set up irrigated agriculture here," explained Rev. Deborah Lee of the Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights in Oakland, California.

"Whether we were Chinese migrants or braceros, we were just labor. Companies could spit you out and send you back home. They still can — we still have programs like that. We need to recognize the humanity of people. We're not just workers — we're human beings. We need a system in which we can create families, have our spouses come, raise our children and be part of society. So the senators are really changing the definition."

Even more direct labor-supply schemes will be part of the senators' bill. Currently, the three main official guest-worker visa programs, H1B, H2A and H2B, allow employers to recruit about 250,000 workers outside the country every year, and bring them with visas that require them to work in order to stay. Some allow workers to change jobs (H1B), while others require them to remain with the employer who contracted them (H2A and H2B). Some, but not all, visa programs require employers to recruit locally first (H2A), and allow workers to eventually apply for residence (H1B).

In parallel with the Senate deliberations, the AFL-CIO and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce announced agreement on yet another such program, called the W visa. It would allow employers to recruit workers to fill labor shortages documented by a new federal commissioner, require them to recruit locally first, and peg wages of guest workers to an employer's existing wage scale or to prevailing wages in the industry in which they're recruited. Workers would be able to change jobs, but could not remain out of work for longer than 60 days or they'd have to leave the country.

Ana Avendaño, assistant to AFL-CIO President Trumka and director of immigration and community action for the AFL-CIO, wrote that under this proposal, "employers have the comfort of knowing that, as the economy picks up, workers — foreign or domestic — will be available to fill jobs that will fuel economic growth. Workers have the comfort of knowing that local workers will have the chance to apply for those jobs."

Making a deal on a new guest worker program is a means to win over Republican senators and representatives who respond to employer lobbying. In its mobilization efforts around the country, the AFL-CIO and other Washington, D.C.-based lobbying groups have announced their central priority is a "pathway to citizenship" — that is, a legalization program for the undocumented.

This goal is painted in broad strokes. "There is absolutely no distinction," said AFL-CIO President Trumka at an event kicking off an April 10 rally, "between workers who were born in this country and those who came here to build a better life. We're all in the same boat, every one of us who works for a living. We rise or fall together."

Other organizations, however, have been critical of those aspects of the senators' plan that will increase enforcement and expand labor-supply programs. Communications Workers of America (CWA) President Larry Cohen warned that "CWA will monitor any proposed changes to visa programs like the H-1B visa, which are sought after by business but have cost U.S. technicians and other workers tens of thousands of jobs."

The Senate bill would raise the numerical limit on those visas. Columbia professor and former labor organizer Mae Ngai noted in the New York Times: "From the agricultural 'Bracero Program' of the 1940s and '50s to the current H-2 visa for temporary unskilled labor, these programs are notorious for employer abuse."

In Washington state, Rosalinda Guillen, the director of Community2Community, a farm worker group that organizes cooperatives and advocates for immigrant rights, worried that once undocumented agricultural laborers gained legal status they would face competition from guest workers brought into the country by growers. She noted that the state's agricultural lobby is pushing intensely for guest workers. The Senate bill transforms the existing H2A agricultural guest worker program into two new ones — W2 and W3 — and sets up a special legalization process for farm workers in exchange for making the programs more attractive to growers.

"Farm workers deserve an opportunity to begin building healthy sustainable careers in the food system," Guillen explained. "As long as corporate agriculture is allowed to legally bring in an exploitable workforce, our food system will continue to decline and farm worker families will continue to be the lowest paid workers in the country, working one of the most dangerous jobs, so consumers can eat cheap food and corporations can continue to get richer!"

Many of the April 10 rallies highlighted other problems with U.S. immigration law. In Berkeley, a group organized by teachers and the Alameda Central Labor Council lined a pedestrian bridge across the freeway. They were led by children from Jefferson Elementary School, who spoke to the crowd.

One young student, Kyle Kuwahara, read a letter he'd written to President Obama, protesting the decision by U.S. immigration authorities to refuse to allow fourth-grade student Rodrigo Mendoza, along with his family, to return home to Berkeley after a vacation in Mexico.

"He has been in our school for five years and he is a friend of mine," Kuwahara wrote. "Rodrigo is not free to come back. In school we are learning about all these important people like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks who fought for people's civil rights and freedom. So what about Rodrigo's freedom? Who is fighting for his freedom?"

The Mendoza family's crisis highlighted the massive enforcement wave of the last four years, in which more than two million people have been detained and deported. Almost all the April 10 rallies demanded a moratorium on mass deportations while Congress debates reform proposals. Some even demanded that the huge system of privately run immigrant detention centers be dismantled.

Many in the Berkeley crowd had also engaged in a long fight to save the jobs of workers at a local foundry, Pacific Steel Castings. A year ago, 214 undocumented workers were fired after the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency examined company records in a process called an I-9 audit.

After identifying workers who had no legal immigration status, or "work authorization," ICE then sent the company a letter demanding it fire them. The same process has led to the firing of hundreds of thousand of workers across the country during the Obama administration.

City councils throughout the East Bay sent letters to DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano pointing out that the firings would not only be a disaster for the families involved, but would damage local communities. Political pressure succeeded in delaying the firings, but couldn't stop them.

Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin accused ICE of undermining her city's already-devastated economy in the middle of a recession. "Their firing is a violation of their human rights," she said at the time. "When they say that [immigration] raids are targeting criminals, it's not true. People who are just trying to make a living are being targeted big time."

The company and the workers' union, Molders Union Local 164, released a joint statement, in which Pacific Steel declared, "These terminations were not only devastating to the workers and their families, but also to the workforce at PSC ... [We] implore the protesters to direct their attention to the Department of Homeland Security and federal policy makers."

The union also criticized "the broken and unfair laws used by the government to disrupt and destroy the lives of many of our friends and colleagues."

A month before the April 10 demonstrations, one union even went on strike against the firing of three workers in an E-Verify check. The workers lost their jobs when Waste Management, Inc. fired them for lacking "work authorization." The company sent them the notice in the middle of a bitter conflict over the union contract with Local 6 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU).

"I believe the company is trying to intimidate workers," said ILWU organizer Agustin Ramirez. "For a long time, workers didn't fight with this company. But recently, they decided to terminate the contract,

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A CUP OF COFFEE

I grew up drinking coffee black. But when I became poor, I learned that there are big jars of sugar and entire pitchers of milk available free to anyone who buys a cup of coffee. You can add enough sugar (carbohydrate) and milk (protein and fat) to relieve your hunger for a couple of hours.

by Howard Tharsing (Dasman)

Yesterday afternoon I sat at a table on the sidewalk in front of the Maxwell's House of Caffeine on Dolores Street at 17th in San Francisco. I had spent my last two dollars on a cup of coffee and sat with my two bags, one of which holds three days worth of clean clothes, while the other holds my papers, the books I am reading, stationery, stamps, notebooks, tools (tiny LED flashlight, screwdriver, etc.) and toiletries.

I had spent my last two dollars on coffee for a couple of reasons. For one, I was tired and yet not ready to rest (that is, I had no place to rest, no place to go except the street). For another, I wanted to stay within a few blocks of where I was while waiting for a return call from a friend who lives around the corner.

The cup of coffee was a way to rent a table at which to sit while I waited. And beyond these reasons, coffee assumes a special importance when you are as poor as I.

I grew up drinking coffee black. I even believed in the moral superiority of those who drink coffee black. I looked down on those who polluted the brew with cream and sugar as weaklings who could not take the real thing.

But when I became poor, I quickly learned that there are big jars of sugar and entire pitchers of milk available free to anyone who buys a cup of coffee. If you can get the barista to leave enough room in the cup, you can add enough sugar (carbohydrate) and milk (protein and fat) to relieve your hunger for a couple of hours.

So there I sat, sipping my meal and reading the novel I had checked out from the library.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw an African-American man pulling himself along the sidewalk sideways. He approached me deferentially.

" 'Scuse me, sir," he said. "I'm not tryin' to rob you or nothin'."

"Oh," I said, "I know that."

"Do you have a dollar or a quarter you can spare?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't," I said.

He had not paused for my reply but continued his probably oft-repeated appeal.

" 'Cause I just got released —"

I cut off his pitch.

"Yeah, I got released two days ago," I said.

His tone of voice changed completely, no longer pleading but simply direct and familiar. "From where?" he asked.

"Bruno," I said, dropping the "San" from the name of San Francisco County Jail 5, which is in the city of San Bruno, and thereby establishing my bona fides as a former inmate.

"And now I'm homeless," I went on, "and this cup of coffee is my dinner."

He looked at me kindly as he slid past me, continuing to sidle down the sidewalk on his way. As he passed me he leaned in close, tapped me gently on the shoulder with a closed fist, and spoke softly, close to my ear.

"Take it easy," he said.

"You too, brother," I heard myself reply as he walked away.

It was the first time in my life that I had ever called a black man "brother," and I had done so instinctively, without thinking.

As much as I might have wanted to use that term in the past, I had always felt self-conscious and afraid of giving offense. The shame of privilege had restrained me. That shame had kept me from expressing a common humanity into which my incarceration had now set me free.

Demands Rise on Congress to Uphold Rights

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which expired years ago. The company was threatening their jobs, and by terminating the contract they could go on strike. So WMI used this way to try to stop them. It was like WMI was telling the workers, 'since you dare to question what we do, then we'll question your documents.'"

The ILWU filed an unfair labor practice charge, accusing the company of "unilaterally implementing the E-Verify employment eligibility verification program" and "terminating employees for alleged lack of authorization to work in the United States," among other charges. Then the workers struck for a day over the company's legal violations.

"While the company is using immigration law for retaliation," Ramirez said, "the real problem is the law itself, because it makes firing the punishment for lacking legal status. The reality is that all the workers have families here, and are trying to stabilize their situation. One even came to the U.S. when she was only three, and has an application for the Dream Act program [which defers deportation for students for two years and gives them work authorization]. The company fired her anyway."

Fights against the use of E-Verify have grown over the last two years, at Hilton and Waste Management, at the Mi Pueblo Supermarkets and at many other worksites. Immigrant workers have organized marches and demonstrations against the I-9 audits, which have hit not only union molders at Pacific Steel, but union janitors in Los Angeles, Sacramento, Minneapolis, Seattle and other cities, and non-union workers at Chipotle restaurants and the American Apparel clothing factory.

In the 1990s, a similar wave of firings directed against unions and organizing drives gave political weight to immigrant activists inside the AFL-CIO, as they fought for a pro-immigrant policy. They argued that "employer sanctions," the law that provides the legal basis for E-Verify and I-9 audits, was an inherent violation of workers' rights to organize, and to work and support their families. At the AFL-CIO convention in 1999, they were able to convince the federation to call for repealing the law. In 2009, however, the AFL-CIO Executive Council adopted "The Labor Movement's Principles for Comprehensive Immigration Reform." Point two calls for "A secure and effective worker authorization mechanism."

Yet the massive wave of immigration-related firings is the way work authorization is actually enforced. Local fights against firings inevitably question support for sanctions in Washington, D.C. They suggest that instead of treating increased enforcement as something to be traded for legalization, that ending it should be part of labor's immigration reform program.

Rev. Deborah Lee of the Interfaith Coalition predicts that unions and immigrant rights organizations may eventually be divided over whether to support Congressional reform proposals, since they call for vastly increased enforcement. "A lot of families are suffering now because of earlier immigration deals trading legalization for enforcement," she said. "We need to think long term — if the deals today are going to create more problems for families in the future."

In some communities, anger against previous tradeoff deals is palpable. The Coalicion de Derechos Humanos in Tucson called comprehensive immigration reform "primarily a vague promise used to attract immigrant and Latino voters, [while] border communities have suffered the costs of irresponsible and brutal enforcement policies, resulting in death and violence."

Increased border enforcement was part of the tradeoff for immigration amnesty in 1986, and was beefed up again in the Clinton administration immigration reform package of 1996.

A recent study found the federal government spends more on border and immigration enforcement than on all other law enforcement agencies combined. The bill drafted by the Senate "Gang of Eight" would spend at least another $3.5 billion immediately on border enforcement, with the possibility of $2 billion more later. It would include building more walls, and using drones and other means of electronic surveillance.

Moving forward with some aspects of legalization would only come after the government made plans for the surveillance and cutting down of undocumented migration. The special court in Tucson that tried 70 young migrants, brought before judges in chains and sentenced to time in a federal lockup for border crossing, would be expanded to process 210 per day.

Derechos Humanos also called for the repeal of employer sanctions and the E-Verify system. It advocates ending guest worker programs because they increase job competition and pit resident workers against those brought to the U.S. by employers. Instead "job creation and training programs should be implemented for all unemployed workers, ensuring a healthy and robust workforce," according to a recent statement responding to the Gang of Eight proposal.

Rising demands for a more rights-based reform than the one on the table in Washington will certainly make negotiations more difficult. In the past, those calling for one have been accused of undermining efforts to achieve what's "politically possible," at least according to the Beltway calculations. But these voices won't be easily shut out of the national debate.

Jon Pedigo, a priest at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in San Jose, organized a breakfast for people of faith as part of the April 10 actions in Silicon Valley.

In his homily the Sunday before, he told parishioners, "The authorities will try to silence these voices by dismissing them as irrelevant. We have learned through these 50 years of organizing campesinos, low-wage workers, and immigrant families that you cannot shut down the conversation. You cannot *silence* the truth of our woundedness. We must confront authorities with stories of children's fearing that their parents might be taken away from them and deported. The voices of mothers whose children have been torn from their arms cannot be ignored."

See "David Bacon, Photographs and Stories" at http://dbacon.igc.org.

The Patron Saint of Charity and Justice

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humble work. Yet Martin served in many other ways. With his training as a barber-surgeon, he served those who were discriminated against at no charge. He cared for the ill, especially those who were poor and homeless, and often brought them home to the monastery.

He also treated homeless and injured animals. When he was told by his order that he could not bring ill and injured humans or animals into the monastery any more, he turned to his sister Joan. Joan took in the humans and the animals, creating the first free clinic for people, and the first free veterinary clinic for animals.

Martin gave away thousands of dollars worth of food and clothing to poor and hungry people each week, after begging these donations from wealthy families. He also raised money for an orphanage for Lima's homeless and abandoned street children. And he raised money for dowries for women who otherwise would have ended up on the street as beggars or been forced into servitude.

Martin stood up for poor people and animals, even from his lowly rank in the Dominican Order. He was the advocate of those who needed him. On one occasion, after he was instructed not to bring to the monastery any more sick and homeless people, he found an old man on the street near death and covered with sores. He brought the man to his monastery cell and nursed him back to health.

In her book, *Martin de Porres, Hero,* Claire Bishop describes the reaction of one of the lay brothers who was dismayed by Martin's act of kindness and said, "It's an outrage ... Look at those blankets! The [monastery's] blankets! All stained with blood and pus. I shall complain."

Martin's response was, "Listen to me. Blankets, I can wash. Soap and water will remove stains. But it would take more than soap and water to clean a soul who failed to help a neighbor in need."

Even after he explained that compassion is more important than clean blankets, Martin was reported to the prior of the monastery for this supposed offense.

The prior told Martin, "As a lay brother you have to obey orders from your superiors. Is that clear?'"

Martin replied, "Was it really wrong to put charity before obedience?" In faithfulness to the precept of charity, Martin had committed an act of "civil disobedience."

One can infer that if the old, ailing man that Martin helped had been well-dressed and of aristocratic lineage, he might have been more welcome in the monastery. This mistreatment of destitute people as social pariahs echoes down through the ages to the present day.

In her article, "Block by Block: A BID by Merchants to Seize the Public Commons," [*Street Spirit*, January 2013], Carol Denney described an incident in which an "ambassador" of Block by Block — an organization whose slogan includes "cleaning and hospitality for downtown improvement districts" — repeatedly swept all around and under an impoverished woman sitting on a public bench wrapped in a blanket with her few possessions.

Denney wrote, "It's safe to suggest that no well-dressed bench-sitter would be similarly treated." She also pointed out that the ambassadors "steamwash sidewalks so repeatedly that anyone carrying everything they own is likely to have their few belongings soaked and ruined."

Berkeley's ambassadors have turned Martin's lesson in compassion on its head by using an obsession with "cleanliness" to destroy the spirit of charity. His entire life teaches us that the most essential "cleanliness" is an inner state of charity that results in serving one's neighbor.

Charity was so deeply embedded in his soul that he became known as "Martin of Charity." His understanding of charity extended to all living beings, not humans alone. Charity, in the fullest sense of the word in the Hebrew scriptures, means compassion with justice. Martin embodied this. He believed that charity was placed deep in the soul by God.

Charity is not only help to the poor by those who are wealthier. Charity has deeper spiritual roots. It means love and good will towards our fellow creatures. Theologically speaking, charity means the benevolence of God towards all creatures. In other words, charity is "love thy neighbor as thyself."

Rather than being defiled by the discrimination he experienced as a result of the color of his skin and the poverty of his early upbringing, Martin learned deep sensitivity and kindness towards all those facing similar hardships. And he served not only sick and impoverished humans and animals, but also the wealthy aristocrats when they, in desperation, turned to him.

Defiled, uncharitable thoughts lead to uncharitable actions such as trampling on the rights of the poor, increasing their invisibility through Sit/Lie laws, and cutting back on the few protections the poor have, such as food stamps and housing vouchers. It is predicted that more than 140,000 low-income families will lose their housing vouchers as a result of budget cuts triggered by sequestration.

Yet, it is not the poor and homeless who are defiled inwardly or made "unclean." Those who support these anti-homeless measures reflect their own inner defilement. In their refusal to embrace charity, they become complicit in society's neglect and rejection of those in need. Opportunities for charitable actions are to be embraced as opportunities for cleansing and healing. Martin knew this, and so did Jesus.

Denney's article on the Berkeley ambassadors touches on this. She writes, "The point remains that demonizing poor and homeless people helps smooth the way for discriminatory laws, discriminatory practices, and a population unable to hear or respond to honest human need."

In Denney's analysis, "There is a very tangible human cost to allowing greed to play the largest role in our community and our legislative priorities."

One thinks of the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 when government-controlled systems such as health care, rent control, and old-age pensions were discarded. Countless families fell apart, and children as young as four years of age were forced to live in the street. As a result, in the mid-1990s, estimates of homeless children living on the streets in the former Soviet Union ranged from hundreds of thousands to two million. An estimated 1.3 million homeless children live on the streets in the United States today.

As our charitable laws are threatened more and more, what will become of the non-affluent people in our nation? For that matter, what will happen to animals in factory farms when bills are proposed in California and passed elsewhere in the nation making it more difficult for whistleblowers to report abuse?

Turning now to his charity towards animals, the holy card of Martin depicts a cat, a dog and a mouse all drinking soup from the same bowl without injuring each other. Animals were not adversaries in Martin's presence, and he himself was a vegetarian out of respect for animals.

In *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art,* Alejandro R. Garcia-Rivera suggests that the bowl of soup in this iconic image is actually a Eucharistic meal to which all of creation is called.

The holy card of Martin depicts a cat, a dog, and a mouse all drinking soup from the same bowl without injuring each other. A dove, symbolic of the holy spirit, transforms the soup into a Eucharistic meal for all creatures.

The ultimate, charitable community is reflected in the words of Isaiah: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them" [*Isaiah* 11:6]. Garcia-Rivera believes that Martin de Porres is that little child that can lead humanity.

There are many examples of his charity towards animals. As described by Bishop in *Martin de Porres, Hero,* he saw a mouse in a trap in the monastery, and set it free. The sexton chastised him, saying the mice have been eating the altar cloths, which the monastery cannot afford.

"But," cried Martin, "mice mean no harm. They are just hungry." Taking the sexton's concern to heart, Martin, like a pied piper, called on the mice in the monastery to follow him out to a barn. He told them that if they would live there, he would feed them every day, which he did, from kitchen scraps. From then on, the monastery was free of mice as a result of Martin's act of charity.

The most extraordinary account of his charity towards animals, however, is the story in which Martin rescues a dog from an unkind, disloyal owner. Apparently, an 18-year-old dog had mange and many complained about his smell. Giving in to the complaints of others, his owner, the steward of the monastery, had the dog killed. Martin rescued the dog, and brought him back to life and health, saying to the dog, "Now, don't you ever go back to your ungrateful master. You must know by this time how little your long years of faithfulness have been appreciated."

When Martin was dying, a doctor wanted to apply a poultice made of the blood of freshly killed young roosters to relieve him of his headaches. Martin refused, saying it was "a pity to kill the poor animals to concoct a useless remedy." This story was recounted in Giuliana Cavallini's inspiring biography, *St. Martin de Porres*.

The prayer card of Martin is a true portrayal of what people valued in him the most. It is the holy card most popular in the Americas, second only to the holy card of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Martin is shown holding a broom. He kept up his so-called menial tasks until the end of his life. His broom was never used to afflict the poor and the homeless, to sweep the streets of the most oppressed, to render the poor even more invisible.

In the background of one version of the card is an ill and bedridden man. Martin's works of charity included healing and ministering to the poor and homeless.

Three animals, often adversaries, drink from the same bowl of soup in Martin's presence — a dog, a cat and a mouse. A dove, symbolic of the holy spirit, according to Garcia-Rivera, transforms the soup into a Eucharistic meal for all creatures — a communion, a community of love.

In our era, marked by widespread poverty and collective amnesia about the supreme importance of compassion and justice, Martin de Porres provides an example for all of us of the ways in which charity within becomes manifested as charity without — charity on all levels, for all creatures.